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From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity

Course Guidebook

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With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in the textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and more than 20 scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited 12 books, including *The Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 3rd ed. 2004); *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 2004); and *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). He is currently at work on a new commentary on several non-canonical Gospels for the *Hermeneia Commentary* series, published by Fortress Press.

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the President of the Society of Biblical Literature, SE Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E.J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, he

has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC.

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A History of Early Christianity

Scope:

The Christian church has been the most powerful religious, political, social, cultural, economic, and intellectual institution in the history of Western civilization, from late antiquity, to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and on into modern times. It continues to assert enormous influence on the history and shape of our culture today as the largest of the world's religions (with two billion adherents). Yet the Christian movement did not start out as a culturally significant phenomenon; it began in a remote part of the Roman Empire as a small, lower-class group of followers of a Jewish apocalyptic preacher, crucified as an enemy of the state. For more than a century, the Christian church was virtually unknown among the political and cultural leaders of the Western world. How did Christianity grow into such an enormously influential institution from such humble beginnings? That is the overarching question of this course.

Following two lectures that introduce the topic, explain the issues that we address, and set the context for the emergence of Christianity among the other (pagan and Jewish) religions of the Roman world, the course divides itself up into six major sections. Section 1 deals with the "Beginnings of Christianity." There, we will consider the figures and traditions that lie at the foundation of the emerging Christian religion. We will begin by exploring what can be known about the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish prophet who became the object of worship for Christians throughout the world, based on a belief in his Resurrection from the dead as a sign of God's divine favor and of his own unique standing before God. We will then consider the traditions about Jesus that began to circulate after his death, leading to the writing, some decades later, of the Christian Gospels—some of which came to be included in the New Testament. Finally, we will consider the life and teachings of the apostle Paul, who was, beyond doubt, the most important figure for the development of early Christianity apart from Jesus.

Section 2 considers "Jewish-Christian Relations." Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, originally composed of Jewish followers of a Jewish teacher of the Jewish Law; yet within a century, it had become an anti-Jewish religion. How did this happen? In three lectures, we will explore the

rise of anti-Judaism within the Christian church and the emergence of Christianity as a religion distinct from and in opposition to the Jewish religion from which it emerged.

Section 3 consists of two lectures on the spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean, beginning with the missionary work of the apostle Paul and continuing with the Christian mission of the second and third centuries. Here, we will consider the message the Christians proclaimed and their approaches to winning converts, asking what they said or did that convinced people to abandon the worship of their own gods to accept the God of the Jews and put their faith in Jesus as his son.

In section 4, we examine the hostile reactions to the Christian mission from among those who were not persuaded to convert, but who considered Christianity to be a dangerous, or at least an anti-social, religion, leading to the persecutions of the second and third centuries. In the process, we will explore, not only the historical information about when and where persecutions erupted, but the even more intriguing question of why pagan crowds, and eventually imperial officials, most of whom were themselves religious persons and generally tolerant of religious diversity, decided to attack Christians in an attempt to force them to recant.

Section 5 moves from the external opposition to the religion to conflicts that occurred within its ranks, as Christians with divergent understandings of the faith engaged in struggles to determine what the "true" faith involved and what Christians everywhere should believe. In four lectures, we will consider the wide range of Christian belief in evidence in the first and second centuries, held by various groups. All these groups believed that they were "right" and the others were "wrong." Moreover, all had authoritative texts that supported their views, books allegedly written by apostles, but most of which were, in fact, forged. We will then examine several of these forged works that happen to have been discovered in modern times.

Finally, in the five lectures of section 6, we will explore the factors that led to the formation of traditional Christianity, that is, Christianity as it developed into the Middle Ages and down into modern times, with its canon of New Testament Scriptures, its set creeds, its liturgical practices (such as baptism and the Eucharist), and its church hierarchy.

The final lecture will bring together the various issues we have discussed and consider the state of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century,

when the Roman emperor Constantine converted to the faith. We will conclude by seeing how this conversion played such an enormous role in the history of Western civilization, as it propelled the Christian church from being a persecuted minority to becoming a sanctioned religion. Eventually, by the end of the fourth century, it was to be declared the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Lecture One
The Birth of Christianity

Scope: Christianity has been, by far, the most important religious, social, and cultural phenomenon in Western civilization and continues to be the largest religion in the world, with some two billion adherents. In this course, we will consider how it all began, starting with the historical Jesus himself and moving through the critical first 300 years of Christianity, up to a key moment, the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

This lecture introduces some of the essential issues: How did Christianity develop away from its Jewish roots to become an anti-Jewish religion? How did it win converts throughout the Roman Empire? Why and how was it persecuted in its early years? How diverse was it internally, with various "heretical" groups claiming to represent the true teachings of Jesus? And how did the creeds, the canon of the New Testament, and the church hierarchy all develop out of its earlier diversity? How, in the end, did this religion conquer the Roman Empire to become the most important religion of our civilization?

Outline

I. Christianity is without a doubt the most significant religious movement in the history of Western civilization.

- **A.** Throughout the history of the West, the most important institution of any kind—not just religiously but also politically, economically, socially, and culturally—has been the Christian church, from late antiquity, to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and on into modern times.
- **B.** Despite the central importance of other great religious traditions—Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism—Christianity remains the largest religion in the world, with some two billion adherents.
- **C.** Yet it was obviously not always that way. Christianity, in fact, began as a small and inauspicious sect within Judaism; its earliest adherents were a tiny group of uneducated and illiterate Jewish

peasants in a remote and unsavory corner of the Roman Empire. They followed a virtually unknown Jewish teacher who was executed for treason against the state.

II. The basic question we will deal with in this course is how we got from one to the other, how Christianity could have such a stunning impact after such an unpromising beginning.

A. We will not cover the entirety of the Christian religion, but only its first three centuries—from the time of Jesus of Nazareth, in the first century A.D., to the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, in the early fourth century.

B. Jesus of Nazareth was, of course, the founder and foundation of the Christian religion.

1. After his day, Christianity moved by fits and starts through the Roman Empire, usually slowly, even if steadily.
2. For centuries, though, it was a small, unfavored, and even persecuted splinter group from Judaism.

C. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to become a follower of Jesus.

1. Once he accepted the Christian message, everything changed. Before his conversion, the church had grown from being a mere handful of Jewish followers of Jesus to being something like five percent of the empire.
2. After Constantine's conversion, though, the religion took off in a big way; by the end of the fourth century, it could claim something like half of the empire's population and, in fact, was declared the empire's official religion.

D. What happened in those intervening years between Jesus and Constantine? How did the religion start? How did it relate to its mother religion, Judaism? How did it grow? How was it received by the masses? By the empire? Why was it persecuted? How did it develop and change internally?

E. These are the questions we will explore in this course. I will begin, in this lecture, by explaining some of the intriguing questions that we will address in the lectures to follow.

III. Most people who converted to Christianity, of course, were former pagans—polytheists adhering to various religions of the Roman Empire.

- **A.** Thus, we need to begin by seeing what these religions were like, what kinds of gods their adherents worshipped, why they worshipped them, and how they did so.
- **B.** We will consider whether there are any points of contact between the Christian's belief in one true God who created all things and was sovereign over all and the pagan's beliefs in many gods who influenced every aspect of life. Was Christianity *completely* different from these other religions?
- **C.** Christianity started out, of course, as a sect of Judaism. Jesus himself was a Jewish teacher, and his followers were Jewish peasants. We will need to consider, then, what Judaism was like in the ancient world, how it was like and unlike the pagan religions that were predominant at the time.

IV. After reflecting on the religious milieu of Jesus and his earliest followers, we will examine the beginnings of Christianity itself.

- **A.** We will start with the historical Jesus, beginning with why it is so difficult to know what Jesus himself actually said and did, despite the several sources we have that describe his life.
- **B.** We will then consider how modern historians have tried to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus and show why it appears that he is best understood as a Jewish prophet who devoted his ministry to calling Jews of his day to repent in light of the coming judgment of God.
- **C.** Christians have understood Jesus as much more than that, of course. Thus, we will consider how the religion of Jesus (that is, the one he preached) became the religion about Jesus (that is, the one that preached him.) Here, we will focus especially on the apostle Paul to see how he helped to transform Jesus's message into a new religion based on Jesus's death and Resurrection.

V. Once Christianity became a new religion, separate from Judaism, there is obviously the question of how Christians related to Jews in the early centuries. In the next section of the course, we will consider the historically significant issue of how Christianity started as a sect within Judaism, yet became a virulently anti-Jewish religion in the span of just over a century.

VI. Christians, of course, had to relate not just to Jews and Judaism but to the larger Roman world. In the next section of the course, we will consider issues involving Christianity and empire.

A. We will start by asking how Christianity managed to win converts in the empire from among pagans.

1. What did Christians preach that proved so convincing to others that they renounced their former religion to follow the teachings of Christ?

2. What missionary strategies did Christians use? How successful were they?

B. How was Christianity received by those who did not accept the religion? Here, we will consider the intriguing historical questions of when, where, and how Christians were persecuted by non-Christian masses and imperial authorities, sometimes to the point of death.

VII. While Christianity was spreading and interacting with both Jews and pagans, of course, it was also developing internally.

A. Some of the most intriguing aspects of early Christianity involve its widely diverse character, as different people claiming to be Christian adhered to all sorts of beliefs and practices, asserting that their views were true and that other Christians with other beliefs were wrong.

B. We will consider some of the internal battles among Christians to decide what was *orthodoxy* (that is, "right belief") and what was *heresy* (that is, "false belief").

1. In this context, we will see how various Christian groups adhered to different written authorities for their views—books allegedly written by apostles.

2. Many of these books, however, were forged. We still have a number of these forgeries today, because of recent archaeological discoveries.

3. It was out of this set of conflicts that the New Testament as a collection of authoritative books emerged. How did we get this set of books, and why do we have these books instead of others?

C. We will conclude the course by considering the formation of early Christianity to become the kind of religion with which people today are familiar.
   1. This religion includes a canon of Scripture; a creed that expresses the "correct" theological beliefs, such as the doctrine of the Trinity; practices of worship that include such rites as baptism and the Eucharist; and a kind of church structure that includes clerical offices, such as priests, bishops, and eventually, a pope.
   2. Christianity did not always have these things, of course, which means that we will address the question of how they all developed.

VIII. In a final wrap-up lecture, we will consider the internal and external success of Christianity, as it developed over its first 300 years to become a religion that would eventually convert, then dominate the religious, political, social, and cultural world of the Roman Empire and be transmitted down to us today as the most important institution in the history of our form of civilization.

Essential Reading:

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 1.

Supplementary Reading:

Everett Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (articles on sundry topics).

W. F. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Before we begin to explore the historical record, it might be useful for you to reflect on your own about the success of early Christianity. Come up with as many reasons as you can for why Christianity might have proved "successful" in establishing itself as a major religion. In your opinion, does the success of a religion (Christianity or any other) indicate anything about its truth claims? In other words, if it succeeded, does that indicate that it is right?

2. Try to imagine ways that the Christianity you may be familiar with today—whether by personal commitment or any other experience—might be different from Christianity in its early years. Is it possible that the religion of the earliest followers of Jesus might have been radically different from the Christianity you have been exposed to in the modern world? How would we know?

Lecture Two
The Religious World of Early Christianity

Scope: To understand how Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman world, we need to understand something about religion in that world generally. The first part of this lecture discusses the "pagan," polytheistic religions to which nearly everyone in antiquity adhered, religions that worshipped many gods through acts of prayer and sacrifice to secure divine favor for the hardships of the present life.

The lecture then considers the most important Roman religion for the birth of Christianity: Judaism, the religion of Jesus and his followers. Jews were distinct in the ancient world for worshipping only one God, who was believed to have created this world and to have chosen the Jews to be his people, as evident in the Law he had graciously given them through Moses. It was out of this Jewish matrix in the broader Greco-Roman world that Christianity was born.

Outline

I. To understand the rise of Christianity, we need to situate it in its own historical context in the Greco-Roman world.

- **A.** The term *Greco-Roman world* refers to the lands around the Mediterranean from roughly the time of Alexander the Great, c. 300 B.C., to the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, c. A.D. 300.
  - **1.** Alexander was the great world military genius who conquered most of the Mediterranean from his native land Macedonia on east, including Egypt, Palestine, and Persia.
  - **2.** As he conquered, he spread Greek religion, language, and culture with him.
- **B.** The Romans had conquered most of these lands 200 years after Alexander. Their empire eventually reached from Great Britain to Syria, on the southern and northern Mediterranean, including North Africa, Egypt, and Palestine.

II. The vast majority of persons living in the Roman Empire were *pagan*, that is, polytheists who adhered to various local and state religions, or *cults* ("forms of worship").

A. The belief in many gods was seen as natural and obvious.

1. These included the "great gods," known to us through ancient Greek and Roman mythology (Zeus, Apollo, Hera, and Aphrodite and their Roman equivalents).

2. They also included local gods who protected and cared for cities, towns, and villages; even less powerful gods who were localized in forests, rivers, and roads; and family gods who cared for the home.

3. The gods oversaw every human function and activity, including the crops, the cupboard, the hearth, personal health, childbirth, war, love, and most everything else.

4. The divine realm was seen, therefore, as a kind of pyramidal hierarchy, with the few great gods near the top and the less powerful but more immediately relevant gods near the bottom.

B. Religion was not a matter of securing an afterlife but of honoring the gods who could protect and assist mortals in need.

1. The "fear of the gods" was a motivating factor in ancient religion.

2. These religions sought, therefore, the "peace of the gods" (*pax deorum*).

C. The gods were worshipped principally through acts of prayer and, especially, sacrifice.

1. For the most part, this was a periodic affair, not a matter of constant devotion.

2. As a result, ethics was not, for the most part, a feature of these religions.

3. Nor, surprisingly enough for modern people, was correct doctrine central to these religious. There was no such thing as orthodoxy or heresy, right belief or wrong belief, in these religions.

D. As a partial result, most of these religions were completely tolerant of one another (because there was no sense that only one of them could be "true").

1. The state gods were expected to be worshipped by all. That only made sense, because these gods had made the state great.

2. Other gods could be worshipped as tradition required and as people wished.
3. Intolerance was reserved only for immoral or socially disruptive forms of worship.

III. Judaism stood out as unique in the context of the Greco-Roman world.

A. Jews made up a small portion of the Roman Empire—possibly around seven percent at the beginnings of Christianity—and were located not just in Palestine but throughout the Mediterranean.

B. The Jewish religion was like other religions in several ways: It, too, stressed prayer and sacrifice to God at specified times and places and on set occasions to secure divine favor and protect against divine wrath.

C. But in other ways, it was distinctive.

1. Jews insisted on worshipping only one God.
2. They maintained that this God had chosen them to be his people.
3. They believed that he had given them his Law (through Moses), which taught them how to worship him and how to live in community together.
4. Ethics was, therefore, a much bigger part of Jewish than pagan religion, as were certain distinctive community "rules," such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws.

D. We should not think of Judaism as a complete monolith, however, at the beginnings of early Christianity; in fact, there was a wide range of Judaisms.

1. Some Jews emphasized the proper adherence to the temple cult.
2. Others stressed the importance of keeping the Jewish laws as fully as possible in their daily lives.
3. Others emphasized maintaining ritual purity before God.
4. Others insisted on the coming intervention of God to overthrow the forces of evil in the world.

E. Jesus was born in the Roman world into a Jewish home; to understand the beginnings of Christianity, we need to understand the kind of Judaism that he himself embraced and to see how his teachings then came to be developed after his death by his Jewish followers. That will be the subject of the following lecture.

Essential Reading:

David Cartlidge and David Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels*.

Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapters 2, 16.

Calvin Roetzel, *The World That Shaped the New Testament*.

Supplementary Reading:

Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*.

Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*.

Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Explain why it is important to understand the historical "context" of Christianity and reflect on some examples from your own experience in which a misunderstanding has occurred because somebody took a word or action out of context.
2. In what ways were religions in the Greco-Roman world different from what most people today think of as *religion*?

Lecture Three
The Historical Jesus

Scope: This the first of three lectures that will consider the "birth" of Christianity. Here, we will discuss the founder of the Christian religion, Jesus of Nazareth. Historians have come to recognize that our sparse and biased historical sources make it difficult to reconstruct Jesus's life and teachings. In this lecture, we will see how Jesus is referred to in sources outside of the New Testament, then consider the New Testament Gospels themselves to determine what he said and did. The lecture concludes by arguing that Jesus is best understood as an apocalyptic prophet who anticipated that God would soon intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good Kingdom on Earth. It is this message that eventually led to Jesus's execution as a threat to the state.

Outline

I. Christianity obviously started with the life, teachings, and deeds of Jesus. It is important for us to begin our sketch of the history of Christianity, then, with the life of the founder itself.

- **A.** Unfortunately, this proves to be a difficult task, because there are numerous understandings of who Jesus really was and what he actually said and did—even among scholars who have devoted their entire lives to the problem.
  - **1.** For those interested in greater detail, I refer you to The Teaching Company's 24-lecture course on the subject, *Historical Jesus*.
  - **2.** In this lecture, we will scratch the surface in a way that will provide the necessary backdrop for the rest of the course.
- **B.** The major difficulty in reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus has to do with the sources that are available to us.
- **C.** The non-Christian sources (such as those by enemies or interested bystanders) are practically nonexistent.
  - **1.** There are no contemporary pagan (that is, Roman, Greek, or similar) sources for Jesus's life (c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 30), in fact,

no reference to him at all from any such source of the entire first century.

2. Only one non-Christian Jewish source (Josephus) even mentions him and, then, only briefly.

D. As a result, we are left with accounts of Jesus written by his own followers.

1. In the first century, these references to Jesus come almost entirely in the New Testament; scarcely any Christian writings outside the New Testament survive from the period.
2. Even within the New Testament, stories of Jesus's life are scarcely found anywhere except in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

E. The New Testament Gospels are, thus, virtually our only sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus.

1. This provides us with a better situation than for most persons from the ancient world: We have four different biographical accounts.
2. The difficulty is that these accounts differ from one another, sometimes in minor points of emphasis, sometimes in historical detail, and sometimes in major aspects of Jesus's life.
3. At points, some of these differences appear to be flat out contradictory, making it difficult to know which, if any, of the Gospels records historically factual information.

F. The problem appears to be that the Gospels were not intended to be objective descriptions of historical facts but proclamations of the "good news" of the salvation Jesus brought, written by his followers who wanted to promote faith in him.

1. On occasion, these authors convey information that is not historically accurate in order to advance a particular theological view.
2. As a result, scholars have had to devise criteria to determine which bits of information in the Gospels are historically accurate and what has been changed to convey the theology of the church.
3. Generally, it is thought that the earliest accounts are more historically accurate than the later. For example, the Gospel of

Mark is generally thought of as containing more historically accurate accounts than the Gospel of John.

4. Scholars also look for information conveyed independently in more than one source (because it was, thus, more "common" information), that does not obviously support a theological bias (because then it was not "made up" to promote a particular view), and that fits well into what we know about Jesus's own historical context in first-century Palestine.

II. When all the sources are carefully examined following strict historical criteria, it appears that Jesus is best understood as a first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet

A. Apocalypticism was a widespread movement in first-century Judaism.

1. We know about it from such sources as the Dead Sea Scrolls.
2. It was a belief that the present age was ruled by forces of evil, which God would soon overthrow in a cataclysmic act of judgment to bring in a utopian kingdom ruled by his own Messiah.
3. It makes sense that Jesus preached in an idiom familiar to his own day; the words and deeds that can be established as authentic all appear to be related to this kind of apocalyptic message.

B. Jesus's teachings were largely about the coming Kingdom of God and the need to prepare for it.

1. The summary of his words by the earliest Gospel, Mark, is probably accurate (Mark 1:15): The Kingdom was soon to come and people needed to repent in preparation.
2. This was a real Kingdom to be brought by God's special messenger, whom Jesus referred to as the Son of Man (Mark 8:38).
3. The coming judgment would involve a destruction of the present order of things and a complete reversal of fortunes for the powerful and the oppressed (Mark 13:26–27; 10:30).
4. People needed to prepare for its coming, by repenting of their wrongdoing, giving up their power and wealth, and living completely for others (Mark 1:15; Mark 10:13–15, 23–30, 42–44; Matt. 13:45–46).

5. What God wanted was for people to follow the very heart of his Law, the Torah, as summed up in the two commands to love God above all else (Deut. 6:4–6) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18).
6. The message was urgent, because the coming destruction and the appearance of this Kingdom were imminent (Mark 9:1; 13:30; 14:62).

III. It was this message that got Jesus into trouble with the ruling authorities and eventually led to his execution.

A. He evidently spent his ministry in the northern part of Israel, Galilee, proclaiming his message.

B. But the last week of his life, he went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast, with thousands of other Jewish pilgrims.

1. He appears to have wanted to take his message of the coming destruction and salvation to the heart of Judaism.
2. In Jerusalem, he offended the religious and civil authorities by proclaiming that this coming destruction would be aimed at them.
3. The leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem, the Sadducees, arranged to have him taken out of the way as a troublemaker—possibly out of fear that his incendiary message would lead to riots in the city.
4. They delivered him over to the Roman governor, Pilate, who had no qualms about getting rid of another rabble-rouser (two others were executed that same day).
5. Pilate ordered Jesus crucified, and the sentence was carried out immediately, on the morning of the Passover, sometime around the year A.D. 30.

C. Unlike all the other apocalyptic prophets of the first century, though, Jesus had followers who later proclaimed that he had not only been right, but that God had vindicated him by raising him from the dead. That proclamation marks the beginnings of Christianity, as we will see in the next lecture.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chapters 9–13.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapter 15.

E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

Supplementary Reading:

Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

John Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (vol. 1).

Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does the understanding of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet differ from what you've previously thought about Jesus?

2. Does understanding Jesus as an apocalypticist have any bearing on the relevance of Christianity in the modern world?

Lecture Four
Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus

Scope: The goal of this lecture is to show how the Gospels came into being. These are our earliest accounts of the words, deeds, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Not all of the early Gospels made it into the New Testament, however, and many that were once available have since been lost. As we will see, the four New Testament Gospels were all written anonymously: Only later did Christians claim that they had been produced by apostles. None of them, however, appears to be an eyewitness report.

This lecture shows how these four anonymous authors, living decades after Jesus's life, recorded traditions about Jesus that had been circulating orally over the intervening years. It asks whether these traditions faithfully record the events that transpired during Jesus's life and explores the extent to which the traditions had been modified in the retelling.

Outline

I. In the last lecture, we tried to understand the message and mission of the historical Jesus. Christianity, however, is not so much the religion that Jesus proclaimed as the religion that proclaims Jesus.

- **A.** Traditional Christianity has maintained that it was the death and Resurrection of Jesus that brought about the salvation of the world.
- **B.** In this lecture, we will begin to discuss how the apocalyptic message of Jesus came to be transformed into the apocalyptic message about Jesus.
- **C.** This transformation was completely rooted in the Christian belief that Jesus was raised from the dead.

II. The Resurrection of Jesus poses special problems for historians.

- **A.** There are certain historical "facts" that one can discuss about what happened after Jesus's death (his burial; the discovery of his empty tomb by a group of women).
- **B.** But there are other aspects that are problematic for historians.
  - **1.** The accounts are hopelessly contradictory in their details.

2. Further, the event of the Resurrection, as a supernatural (trans-historical) occurrence, is beyond the purview of the historian, who can establish only what happened in history.

III. What is certain is that some of Jesus's followers came to *believe* that he had been raised, and that made all the difference in the world.

A. Jesus had talked about a coming resurrection of the dead at the end of the age; his followers came to believe that he was the first to be raised and, therefore, that the end had begun.

B. Jesus talked about the future judgment to be brought by the Son of Man from heaven; his followers came to believe that he had been exalted to heaven and was himself the Son of Man.

C. Jesus talked about the future Kingdom of God to be ruled by his Messiah; his followers came to believe that he was that future Messiah.

D. Jesus talked about God as the father of all and of himself as having a special relationship with God; his followers came to believe that he was the distinctive Son of God and, eventually, they came to maintain that he was himself divine.

E. If Jesus was the divinely appointed Son of God, coming from heaven as the Son of Man in judgment, why was he here in the first place, and why did he die?

1. For his followers, it soon became apparent that Jesus's death was not just a miscarriage of justice. It was the plan of God. Jesus had to die.
2. Because he did nothing to deserve death, he must have died for others who did deserve it. His death soon came to be seen as a sacrifice for the sins of others.

F. Thus begins Christianity. All of this transformation of Jesus's teaching took place within a few short years of his death.

IV. While this theological development was taking place, and long before the Gospels were written, Christianity was spreading throughout the Roman world. Understanding this earliest Christian mission is important for appreciating the nature of the later Gospels that became part of the New Testament.

A. Within 60 years of Jesus's death, Christianity spread into major urban areas throughout the empire.

B. It was spread by word-of-mouth proclamation, by people telling stories about Jesus.

C. The key question is where people derived their stories, and what happened to the stories as they were told by one person to the next, decade after decade, principally among people who had not been there to see any of the things discussed actually happen.

D. It appears that the stories were modified in the processes of retelling, and a good number of stories about Jesus were actually made up.

V. The Gospels came to be written many years after the stories of Jesus had been in circulation throughout the Roman world.

A. The earliest surviving accounts we have are the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1. These books are actually written anonymously.
2. Their authors were highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians living in different parts of the empire several decades after the death of Jesus (as opposed to the illiterate, Aramaic-speaking disciples of Jesus from Palestine).
3. They used as their sources earlier accounts they had heard (or read) about Jesus.
4. They had some sources in common; for example, Mark, our first Gospel, was evidently used as a source by Matthew and Luke.
5. Each of these accounts is different from the others, sometimes in minor details that are difficult to reconcile (on such issues as which day Jesus was executed, for example), sometimes in major emphases (such as the nature of Jesus's message and mission).
6. These differences make the Gospels difficult for historians to use to establish what actually happened in Jesus's lifetime.
7. These books, however, were not meant to be historically objective biographies of Jesus, but proclamations of the good news of the salvation he brought.

B. Other Gospels were written as well, some of which survive, but the majority of which do not.

1. Some of the earliest accounts of Jesus have been lost—including the document that scholars call *Q*, an early

collection of Jesus's teachings, available to Matthew and Luke.

2. Of the other Gospels that do survive, some are quite ancient and may record historically accurate information about Jesus, including the famous Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them previously unknown, discovered in 1945.
3. These various Gospels also each had their own theological perspectives and understandings of Jesus. In the Gospel of Thomas, for example, what matters for salvation is not Jesus's death but the secret teachings he delivered.

C. All these Gospels were meant as "community books" and were intended to instruct Christian churches in what Jesus said, did, and experienced. Yet they all differed in their messages.

1. Today, we tend to think of Christianity as one thing—even while recognizing that there is a good deal of variety in what Christians believe and practice.
2. In fact, Christianity is and always has been many different things. This is especially true in the earliest Christianity of the first three centuries, as evidenced in the many Gospels that were written, read, and revered as sacred books that revealed the "truth" (in different ways) about what Jesus said, did, and experienced.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet*, chapter 13.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapters 4–12, 17.

Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*.

Supplementary Reading:

James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*.

Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider in detail some familiar stories found in more than one of our New Testament Gospels, such as the accounts of Jesus's birth in Matthew and Luke or the accounts of his Resurrection in all four

Gospels, and note the similarities and differences. Are any of the differences irreconcilable? How do you explain that?

2. If one accepts the premise that Christianity is better understood as the religion *about* Jesus rather than the religion *of* Jesus (that is, it is the religion that proclaims him, rather than the one he proclaimed), how might that affect the practice of Christianity in the modern world?

Lecture Five
The Apostle Paul

Scope: Next to Jesus himself, the most important figure for the development of earliest Christianity was the apostle Paul. Paul was, at first, a Jewish Pharisee who persecuted the Christian church. But based on a visionary experience of the resurrected Jesus, he converted to faith in Jesus and began an intense missionary campaign to win over *Gentiles* (that is, "non-Jews") to faith in Jesus. After starting churches in major urban areas around the Mediterranean, Paul wrote them letters, some of which became books of the New Testament. These writings show a profoundly theological mind, as Paul develops his understanding of the salvation God has provided through Christ's death and Resurrection, which comes to all people, Jew and Gentile, based on faith, not on following the requirements of the Jewish Law. In some ways, Paul marks the beginning of Christianity as a non-Jewish world religion.

Outline

I. The most important figure for early Christianity apart from Jesus is the apostle Paul, whom some scholars have called the "Second Founder of Christianity."

- **A.** By this, they mean that Christianity is more than the religion Jesus preached; it is also—possibly even more so—the religion that preaches Jesus.
  1. In this understanding, it was the apostle Paul who developed the religion of Jesus into the religion about Jesus.
  2. Paul did not simply repeat the teachings of Jesus. He maintained that it was Jesus's own death and Resurrection that could bring salvation for the sins of the world.
  3. Because this belief lies at the heart of the Christian religion, some scholars have maintained that without Paul, Christianity would never have been anything other than a sect within Judaism.
- **B.** Paul is certainly important for understanding the New Testament; 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament claim to be written by

him, one other (Hebrews) was accepted into the New Testament because church leaders thought it was written by him, and one other (Acts) is largely written about him.

C. Paul was also instrumental in the early spread of Christianity, because he was one of the main missionaries of the early church, who took the Gospel of Christ into major urban areas of what is now Turkey and Greece.

II. Despite his importance, there are numerous difficulties in trying to understand Paul's life and theology.

A. Several of the letters that claim to be written by him in the New Testament are commonly thought to be pseudonymous, written by his later followers instead of by Paul himself.

B. The Book of Acts, written long after his death, may not present a completely accurate portrayal of his activities and preaching.

III. Still, it is possible to get a reasonably clear idea of some of the most important aspects of Paul's biography and to see how he developed his theology of the importance of Jesus's death and Resurrection.

A. Paul himself indicates that he did not start out as a Christian, but as a Jewish Pharisee who persecuted the Christians for what he considered to be their blasphemous claim that Jesus was the Messiah.

B. Something happened to convert him, though, from being a persecutor of the Christian faith to being its greatest apostle. Paul indicates that he had a visionary experience of Jesus after his death, which convinced him that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

C. That changed everything. If Jesus was really raised from the dead, he was obviously not the one cursed by God, but the chosen one of God. And that must mean that his death was according to the plan of God, which in turn must have meant that Christ did not die for his own sins (because he was the one most favored by God), but for the sins of others.

1. It is important to realize that before Christianity, there were no Jews who expected the Messiah to die for the sins of others. The Jewish Messiah was to be a great and powerful figure who overthrew the enemies of God and established God's rule

on Earth. He was not to be a weak and defenseless person executed for crimes against the state.

2. Christians like Paul, however, transformed the idea of the Messiah. Because Jesus was the Messiah and because he had suffered, it must be that the Messiah was *supposed* to suffer.
3. Such Christian converts found support for their views in passages in the Jewish Scriptures—not the ones that talk explicitly about the Messiah (where there is no talk of suffering and death), but ones that talk about someone else, a righteous man, who suffers for others. These passages were taken, then, to refer to the Messiah, even though they had never been read that way before (for example, Isaiah 53; Psalm 22).

D. Once Paul came to think that Jesus's death and Resurrection were the keys to salvation, he had to rethink his understanding of his own Jewish religion: If Christ is the way of salvation, what about the salvation God had already provided his people through the Law?

1. Paul came to think that the Jewish Law was misunderstood if it was taken to be a way to maintain a right relationship with God.
2. The Jewish Law can tell a person how to live, but it does not provide anyone with the power to do what it demands. It is itself good, then, but it is not able to bring salvation, only condemnation.
3. Everyone is under the cosmic power of sin in this evil world, and as such, no one is able to fulfill the righteous demands of the Law.
4. Christ, though, broke the cosmic powers of sin and death (evidence: he overcame death!). Those who believe in his death and Resurrection can be made right with God (= *justified*)—not by keeping the Jewish Law, but by having faith in the one who triumphed over evil.

E. Because salvation comes apart from the Law, it is available to everyone, both Jew and Gentile, on equal terms. It comes by faith in Jesus, not by joining the Jewish people or by keeping the Jewish Law.

1. Once Paul became convinced of this, he became a missionary to take the "good news" (the literal meaning of *gospel*) to others, understanding himself principally as an apostle to the *Gentiles* (that is, "non-Jews").
2. He went on numerous missionary expeditions, setting up Christian churches in major urban areas in Cilicia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (modern Turkey and Greece) and converting former pagans to belief in the one God of the Jews and Jesus, his Son, whose death brought salvation.
3. Once Paul established a church in one place, he would move on to another, working to convert as many people as he could as quickly as possible, because for him, "The end is near."

IV. With one exception, the surviving writings of Paul are all letters that he wrote to his churches after he left.

A. Problems would arise in these churches, involving questions of what to believe and how to act, and Paul would deal with these questions one by one.

1. Some of the churches had to deal with other Christian missionaries that Paul considered to be "false teachers." For example, in the churches of Galatia, other missionaries taught the Christians that they needed to keep the Jewish Law in order to be right with God.
2. Some others had to deal with ethical problems that arose. For example, in the church of Corinth, some people assumed that because salvation comes apart from the Law, one can, therefore, live lawlessly, leading to all sorts of immoral behavior.
3. Paul dealt with these problems as they came up, writing letters back to the churches to give them instructions on what to believe and how to live.

B. The one exception is Paul's Letter to the Romans, written to a church he did not found and that he had not visited.

1. Paul apparently wrote Romans to explain his view of the Gospel of Christ, to win their support so that he could use them as a base for his missionary work further west, because he wanted to take his gospel all the way to Spain.
2. Given the nature of this letter, it is the best place to turn for a full expression of Paul's understanding of the gospel.

V. In sum, Paul was an extremely important person in the spread of early Christianity and in the development of Christianity into a religion that was more than a sect within Judaism that accepted the teachings of Jesus about the need to repent and follow the Jewish Law in light of the coming end. For Paul, it was not Jesus's teachings but his death and Resurrection that can bring salvation. Paul's writings, then, form the core of the New Testament and stand at the heart of the beginnings of early Christianity as a major world religion.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapters 18–21.

Wayne Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul*.

Calvin Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*.

Supplementary Reading:

James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*.

Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christian: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*.

Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare the teachings of Jesus with the preaching of Paul about Jesus. What are the similarities and differences? In your judgment, do Jesus and Paul represent fundamentally the same or fundamentally different religions?
2. Exercise some historical speculation: What might have been different about Christianity if Paul had never converted?

Lecture Six

The Beginning of Jewish-Christian Relations

Scope: This is the first of three lectures dealing with the relationship of Jews and Christians in the ancient world. In it, we will consider how Christianity started as a sect within Judaism, yet quickly became a religion separated from Judaism, because most Jews refused to accept the Christian claim that Jesus himself was the Jewish Messiah. In particular, we will consider three of the key figures for Jewish-Christian relations, the historical Jesus himself, who was deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition; the (anonymous) author of the Gospel of Matthew, who stresses the Jewish character of Jesus and the need for his followers to keep the Jewish Law; and the apostle Paul, who insisted that salvation came to all people, Jew or Gentile, apart from the Law. The perspectives of both Matthew and Paul survived into the second century, when some Christian groups held on to their Jewish ethnic identity, whereas other Christians rejected the Jews and all things Jewish.

Outline

I. To this point, we have looked at the social and historical milieu of the birth of Christianity and considered several of the main features of its early years: the historical Jesus, the traditions about him in circulation throughout the Roman Empire, and the life and teachings of Paul. In this lecture, we begin the second part of our course, issues pertaining to the relationship of Christianity to the religion from which it sprang, Judaism.

- **A.** Judaism and Christianity, of course, are two of the great religions of the West, with a long and well-documented history of both beneficial interaction and mutual antagonism.
- **B.** The three lectures that follow are all driven by an important but complicated historical question: How is it that early Christianity, a sect within Judaism, became so quickly and decisively a virulently anti-Jewish religion?
- **C.** In this lecture, we will examine three key figures in this transformation, all of whom considered themselves to be

thoroughly Jewish, yet who understood their relationship to historical Judaism in different ways: the historical Jesus himself, the author of the Gospel of Matthew, and the apostle Paul.

II. As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth cannot be understood apart from his Jewish context.

A. This has not always been recognized; Christian lay people and scholars alike for centuries understood Jesus to stand over against Judaism. The logic appears to have been that if his followers were anti-Jewish, he must have been, as well.

B. But one of the emphatic conclusions of modern historical scholarship is that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish and had no idea or intention of being anything else.

1. Modern scholars have devised a variety of ways of understanding Jesus—as a Jewish rabbi, a Jewish teacher of wisdom, a Jewish holy man, a Jewish proto-Marxist, a Jewish proto-feminist, a Jewish cynic philosopher, a Jewish apocalyptic prophet.

2. What these various understandings all share, however, is the sense that whatever else we say about Jesus, he was totally Jewish.

C. This can be seen in all of the earliest surviving reports about Jesus in our ancient sources.

1. His teachings are all drawn from the Jewish Scriptures and his interpretations of them, including the commandments to love God above all else and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

2. He followed Jewish customs, including Sabbath observance and keeping of Jewish festivals.

3. His followers were all Jewish and considered him a great teacher of the Law.

4. His controversies were all with Jewish opponents and typically concerned how best to interpret the will and Law of the God of the Jews (whether with Pharisees, Sadducees, or anyone else).

D. If the reconstruction of his message that we laid out in our earlier lecture was correct, then the burden of his message was that the Jewish people needed to repent in light of God's coming

judgment, that they might enter into God's Kingdom when it arrived.

1. This message is comparable to that of prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and it stood completely within the confines of Judaism in Jesus's day.
2. His disciples followed him precisely because they, as faithful Jews, adhered to this message.

E. How is it, then, that Christianity, the religion founded on Jesus, became so virulently anti-Jewish?

III. The key to answering that question involves what happened after Jesus's death.

A. As we saw in the last lecture, some of Jesus's followers came to think that Jesus was raised from the dead. This changed everything for them.

1. His followers began to understand that the Resurrection of Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah.
2. Most Jews, of course, did not expect anything like Jesus as a Messiah, because he was a relatively unknown itinerant preacher from Galilee who was arrested, tried, and executed as a common criminal for crimes against the state. How could *he* be the powerful Messiah? He appeared to most Jews to be anything *but* the Messiah.
3. Jews who believed in Jesus, though, insisted that that's precisely what he was. This naturally led to serious conflict between traditional Jews and those who re-understood Judaism in light of their belief in Jesus.

B. Jews who believed in Jesus were opposed by the vast majority of Jews, who found their message absurd and even blasphemous.

C. In response, the Jewish believers in Jesus argued that those who did not accept him were blind to the truth and, because they had rejected the Messiah sent by their own God, they had rejected God himself. Further, because they rejected God, he rejected them.

D. Thus began a long history of antagonism between Christians and non-Christian Jews.

E. As we will see in this and the following lectures, different Christian authors reacted to this situation and dealt with it in a variety of ways.

IV. The anonymous author of the Gospel of Matthew has an ambivalent relationship to historical Judaism.

A. On the one hand, he stresses more than our other Gospel writers that Jesus himself was Jewish, the Jewish Messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people to fulfill the Jewish Law.

1. This can be seen in the opening passages of his Gospel (the birth narratives).

2. And it is a theme that recurs throughout, for example, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17–20).

B. On the other hand, he blames the Jews who refused to acknowledge Jesus for his death and portrays them as blind, hypocritical, and opposed to the will of God.

1. The Jewish leaders are condemned in vitriolic terms in this Gospel (chapter 23).

2. The Jewish people are portrayed as complicit in their blind rejection of Jesus (for example, 27:25).

C. Even so, this understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus was significant for some later groups of Christians, who saw themselves as the "true" Jews and who kept the Jewish Law and customs on the understanding that Jesus himself was thoroughly Jewish.

V. The apostle Paul took a different tack and maintained a different perspective, one that became yet more important historically for the development of Christianity

A. Paul, too, accepted Jesus's Jewishness and saw himself as thoroughly Jewish, a worshiper of the Jewish God and a believer in his promises.

B. As we saw in the previous lecture, however, Paul came to believe that Jesus's death and Resurrection were the only way of salvation and concluded that the Law of the Jews, although itself embodying God's righteous demands, had no role to play in salvation.

1. As a result, he insisted that Christians are made right with God apart from the Law.

2. For him, this meant that Gentiles, who were quickly becoming the majority in the church by the middle to late first century, did not need to keep the provisions of the Law (such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher food laws).

3. Paul understood this as being the goal of the Law itself—the salvation to be brought by Christ apart from the Law.
4. The result was that faith in Christ was not just a Jewish option but was available to all.

C. This marks the beginning of Christianity as a *non-Jewish* religion, which stood over against Judaism and could portray the Jews themselves as outsiders to the promises that God had made to the Jewish ancestors—promises now seen, by the Christians, as being fulfilled not for the Jews but for the followers of Christ, whether Jew or Gentile.

D. This is probably why Paul is commonly understood as anti-Jewish. But it is important to realize that he saw himself as thoroughly Jewish and representing the views of the Jewish God as set forth in the Jewish Bible.

E. Even so, once Paul's doctrine was established that a person's relationship to God is independent of the Jewish Law and Jewish culture, something new had obviously begun, leading to the developments of Christianity as an anti-Jewish religion.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 5.

———, *New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapter 25.

Supplementary Reading:

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?*

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare Matthew's claims that a person must keep the Law to be right with God (Matt. 5:17–20) with Paul's claims that the Law can have no bearing on one's relationship with God (for example, Gal. 2:15–16). Do you think these views can be reconciled, or are they hopelessly at odds with each other?

2. If Matthew's understanding of the importance of the Jewish Law for the followers of Jesus were still adhered to by Christian churches, what might be different about Christianity today?

Lecture Seven

The Anti-Jewish Use of the Old Testament

Scope: Most early Christians, even those who rejected the ways of Judaism, held on to the Jewish Scriptures as the revelation from God. But how could they claim these Scriptures for their own when they did not follow many of the laws set forth in them?

Disputes arose among Christians and Jews over who were the legitimate heirs to the promises made to the Jewish ancestors. In this lecture, we will consider two key figures in the early Christian-Jewish debates: Justin of Rome, who engaged in harsh arguments with Jews over the interpretation of Scripture in an effort to show that Christianity, rather than Judaism, was the way to worship the Jewish God, and Barnabas of Alexandria, who insisted that the Old Testament was a Christian, not a Jewish book.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we began to ask the key historical question about the relationship of Christianity and Judaism.

- **A.** If Christianity started out as a sect within Judaism, beginning with Jesus himself, how and why did it become such a virulently anti-Jewish religion, within just a century or so of its inception?
- **B.** We saw that, even among the New Testament writers, there were radically different understandings of the relationship of this new faith in Christ to the Jewish Law.
  1. Matthew, for example, stressed the ongoing importance of observing the Law as given by God, so that followers of Jesus were, like him, to do all the Law commanded.
  2. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, stressed that salvation comes to all people, Jew and Gentile, only in the death and Resurrection of Jesus, not in doing what the Law commands. For Paul, it is an affront to God and his Christ for non-Jews to keep the Jewish Law.

II. Because the Law was so intimately connected with Jewish identity, the developing understanding of the importance of the Law for Christians became a central issue in the relations of Jews and Christians.

A. Some Christians, after Paul and Matthew, took extreme positions on the importance of the Jewish Law (extreme from the perspective of most other Christians).

1. Some Christians of the second century, known as the *Ebionites*, took the position of Matthew to a logical conclusion: Anyone who wants to be a follower of Jesus needs first to become Jewish and follow all the dictates of the Jewish Law.

2. Other Christians of the second century, known as the *Marcionites*, took the position of Paul to a logical conclusion: Because salvation comes only by believing in Jesus, the Law has no role in salvation. In fact, the God of the Law is not the same as the God of Jesus.

B. Most Christians accepted neither of these two options. Instead, they understood the Jewish Scriptures as a revelation from the Jewish God, on the one hand, but as the Scripture of Christians, who were principally Gentiles and did not follow the scriptural laws, on the other. This led to some serious and difficult issues:

1. Why would and how could Christians hold onto the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, and claim it as their own, if in fact, they did not follow its laws?

2. How could they explain that the Scripture was theirs—these people who didn't follow its laws—when Jewish communities continued to exist and thrive, communities of historical Jews who did keep its laws?

3. These issues became instrumental in the antagonisms between Jews and Christians in the early centuries, as both claimed to be heirs of the same religious traditions yet stood at odds with each other.

4. Two mainline positions were taken on these issues by various Christians in the second and third centuries.

III. The first position maintained that the Jewish Scriptures, called now the Old Testament, foreshadowed and predicted the New Testament and Jesus. The New, therefore, supersedes the Old, so that the Old can be done away with, except insofar as it is used to show the prognostication and prophecy of the fulfillment of God's promises. But it has no ongoing validity of its own on its own terms.

A. As a representative of this view, we can consider the writings of the second-century *apologist* (that is, “defender of the faith”) Justin of Rome, known to history as Justin Martyr.

1. Justin was one of the first serious intellectuals to convert to Christianity in its early years.
2. Born and raised in Samaria, he converted to Christianity, then moved to Rome, where he set up a kind of school of instruction in the Christian philosophy.
3. He was eventually turned over to the authorities as a Christian believer during one of the persecutions and was martyred then for his faith.
4. He wrote numerous works, of which three survive: two defenses of the faith (*apologies*) and one attack on Jewish understandings of their own Law from a Christian perspective, in which he argues that the Law predicts Christ and has been misunderstood by the Jews themselves.

B. This book is called the *Dialogue with Trypho*. It is set up as an actual debate that Justin allegedly had with a Jewish philosopher and teacher, Trypho, probably some time around the year 135 (and written about 20 years later).

C. In it, we see Justin’s Christian understanding of the Old Testament and Judaism.

1. In arguing against his Jewish opponent about circumcision, the sign of the covenant God had given Jews to make them his special people, Justin argues that circumcision cannot really be needed for righteousness, because the Old Testament tells of men who were righteous before the law of circumcision was given to Moses (such as Enoch and Noah).
2. Therefore, God must have given Jews the sign of circumcision to separate them from all others, for punishment.
3. The same is true of the other laws of Moses. These cannot be necessary for a right standing before God, because the Jewish forefathers living before Moses had such standing without the Law. These laws were, therefore, given to Jews because they are a recalcitrant people who needed to be kept in line until the savior, Christ, came.
4. According to Justin, Christ is already revealed in the Old Testament, but Jews are blinded to his presence. In fact, he is

there in the very beginning, at the Creation, when God says, “Let *us* make man.” God, in Genesis, is speaking to Christ.

IV. An even stronger line was taken in an anonymous work known today as the Epistle of Barnabas, which argues that the Old Testament is not and never was a Jewish book. It was a Christian book, which the Jews have misunderstood from the beginning.

A. This anonymous book was attributed to “Barnabas,” writing around 130 A.D. in Alexandria, Egypt

B. His book is designed to show Christians that they should not be tempted to join up with the Jewish community, because their Scriptures are in fact Christian, not Jewish.

1. He maintains that from the beginning, Jews broke their covenant with God (literally: when Moses smashed the tablets of the Ten Commandments when he saw the children of Israel committing idolatry with the Golden Calf).
2. They were then misled into interpreting their laws literally, when in fact, they were meant to be taken figuratively.
3. Barnabas then goes through the key laws of Scripture—laws for kosher foods, Sabbath observance, Temple worship, circumcision—and shows that when interpreted figuratively, they point to Christ.
4. The Jews, with their literal interpretations, have missed the point all along and are not and have never been the people of God. It is the Christians who are God’s people, and the Old Testament is their book.

V. To later historians, it may seem strange that Christians would want to take over the book containing the laws of another religion, claim that book for their own, while self-consciously deciding not to follow its laws. Why would they want to keep this book if they did not want to keep its laws? And how did that affect their relations with Jews who were not Christians? We will address those questions in the lecture that follows.

Essential Reading:

John Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 5.

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

Supplementary Reading:

Claudia Sezter, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians*.

Jeffrey Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you imagine a second-century Jew might have responded to Justin's claim that the entire point of the Old Testament was to anticipate the coming of Christ?
2. In your judgment, is it possible to claim that the Old Testament is a book for Christians rather than for Jews without being anti-Semitic?

Lecture Eight

The Rise of Christian Anti-Judaism

Scope: This lecture explores the social and historical situation that led to the rejection of Judaism by many Christians of the early centuries. Most Jews could not accept the Christian belief that a crucified criminal was, in fact, the powerful Messiah of God and rejected the Christian claim that Jesus's death was in accordance with the Scriptures. This led to a split between the two religions. Yet Christians claimed the Jewish Scriptures as their own—even as they refused to follow many of its laws—in part because in the ancient world, no religion would be taken seriously if it could not claim for itself ancient roots, and without the Jewish Scriptures, Christianity would be perceived as an "innovation" rather than a serious religion.

The polemical stakes were quite high, as evident in the writings of Melito of Sardis, a Christian bishop from the end of the second century who preached a sermon that proclaimed, for the first time on record, that Jews were guilty of "murdering God."

Outline

I. To this point of our lectures, we have seen some of the views of Judaism in evidence among several key figures in the development of early Christianity: the historical Jesus, the apostle Paul, the author of Matthew, Justin Martyr, and Barnabas.

A. One of the important issues in the rise of an anti-Jewish attitude among Christians was the claim to the Jewish Scriptures: To whom do they belong, Jews or Christians? What does it mean for Christians to accept the Scriptures if they refuse to adhere to its laws?

B. We have not yet considered at any length why Christians wanted to hold on to these sacred books of the Jews and to consider them their own. That question is part of what we will address in this lecture.

C. In particular, we will build on the literary views of Christians, found in such texts as Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* and the letter

of Barnabas, in order to reconstruct something of the *historical* relations between Christians and Jews in the early centuries. What can we say about the actual social interactions between these two groups?

II. Our earliest records indicate that there were harsh and bitter conflicts among social groups of Christians and non-Christian Jews from the outset.

A. Even in the New Testament, both the Book of Acts and the apostle Paul indicate that Jews rejected the Christian message and persecuted the Christians who proclaimed it.

1. Paul is a particularly important witness in this development, because he indicates that before his conversion to become a follower of Jesus, he himself was a Jewish persecutor of Christians.

2. Later, as a Christian, his letters indicate that he suffered violence at the hands of non-Christian Jews.

3. This coincides well with what we read in the Book of Acts about early Christian persecution—it always came at the hands of Jews.

4. It is not difficult to understand why: Christians were seen as a troublesome, rabble-rousing, and outspoken minority with completely unacceptable views.

B. At the same time, we must acknowledge that in the middle of the first century, before the books of the New Testament were written, Christianity was still recognized as a Jewish sect.

1. The Roman authorities, in any event, did not differentiate between Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews

2. This is evident in an event during the reign of Emperor Claudius (c. 49 A.D.), in which he cast the Jews, both Christian and non-Christian, from Rome (without differentiating between them).

C. Some years later, however, Roman authorities did differentiate between the two groups, as is evident in the first persecution of Christians at the hands of an emperor, Nero's punishment of Christians for arson in Rome—where he singled out Christians, not Jews, for torture.

D. Further indications of a separation of Christians from Jews came soon thereafter in the Jewish uprising against the Romans in Palestine, leading to a three-year war and the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 C.E. Old traditions indicate that Christian Jews refused to participate in the struggle.

E. By the end of the first century, Christianity had moved from being a persecuted sect within Judaism to being a separate religion from Judaism.

III. The separate existence of Christianity as a distinct religion led to heightened hostilities between the two groups, because in the face of a predominantly pagan world, both groups had to claim legitimacy or face opposition.

A. Jews were, by and large, tolerated throughout the Greco-Roman world and, in fact, had been extended special privileges by imperial authorities, who respected the fact that they represented such an ancient and venerable religion.

B. Once Christianity separated from its mother religion, it no longer enjoyed such protection. It was subject to problems of legitimation of its own.

1. If religious legitimation came on the basis of ancient tradition, and Christianity was a religion that had begun just recently, then it was easily subject to the charge of being a troublesome innovation.
2. Christians were compelled to argue that their religion was ancient, in fact, that it was older than any of the pagan religions, even older than Judaism.
3. How could Christians make such a claim, when Jesus had lived and died so recently? They argued that their religion was the true fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures; that Moses and the prophets had predicted Christ; that from the foundations of the Earth, it was the Christians and the Christians alone who had the truth.
4. This naturally led to heightened antagonisms with Jews, who maintained their own laws and customs based on these Scriptures, and who could point out that Christians refused to do so. To protect themselves, Christians attacked the Jews as representing a false religion. The result was some of the comments we have already seen in Justin and Barnabas.

IV. A further result was the even more exaggerated and vitriolic polemic we find in the writings of a later figure significant for the conflict between Jews and Christians, Melito of Sardis.

A. Melito was a Christian bishop in Asia Minor in the late second century.

B. For years, we had none of his major writings, but in the 1940s, a sermon was discovered that he had written and delivered.

C. It is a sermon that was preached on Easter during the Jewish feast of the Passover, which uses the Passover (Exodus) story of the Old Testament to show that the entire account prefigured none other than Jesus.

D. Melito then uses the occasion to bemoan the fact that this one who had been predicted in the Jewish Scriptures had come to be rejected by the Jewish people. The Jews, in fact, rejected their own Messiah. More than that, for Melito, because Jesus is God, the Jews have rejected God.

E. In fact, because they were responsible for executing Jesus, the Jews are guilty of killing God. This is the first instance we have of the charge of deicide in the conflicts of Christians against Jews.

V. At this point of the history of Jewish-Christian relations (late second century), such polemic was little more than a defensive posturing by a tiny minority splinter group with no real power. Christians were scattered and politically innocuous.

A. That was to change over time, as numbers of pagans began to join the fold, and eventually, Christians began to assume positions of authority. I will give a fuller account of how that happened in a later lecture. For now, I can simply give some figures.

1. Christians made up maybe two to three percent of the empire near the end of the second century; by the beginning of the fourth century, maybe five to seven percent.
2. But then the Roman emperor Constantine converted (as we will see more fully later), and that changed everything. Massive conversions transpired, including of the elite classes in the empire; thus, by the end of the fourth century, nearly half the empire was Christian.

3. Constantine made Christianity a legal, even favored religion. One of his later successors, Theodosius, made it the official state religion at the end of the fourth century.

B. With the success of Christians came the persecution of the Jews, as later Christians in power took the rhetoric of their weak predecessors seriously and treated Jews as those who were opposed to God and his Messiah.

1. During Constantine's day, there were no officially sanctioned acts of violence against Jews.
2. There were, however, plenty of instances in which officials looked the other way when synagogues were burned or properties were confiscated.

VI. With the victory of Christianity came a serious heightening of anti-Jewish polemic, with Judaism being seen as a false religion; further, this polemic was backed by imperial power. Thus, Jews moved from being a highly respected religious community to being an economically handicapped, socially ostracized, and persecuted minority in the empire—the ignominious situation Jews found themselves in throughout the Middle Ages and down to modern times.

Essential Reading:

John Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 5.

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

Supplementary Reading:

Claudia Sezter, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Is there a difference, in your opinion, between harsh polemic produced by a weak and defenseless outcast group and the same polemic invoked by a socially and politically powerful group? Or is it all the same?
2. In your judgment, would we have had the modern history of anti-Semitism apart from the rise and conquest of Christianity?

Lecture Nine
The Early Christian Mission

Scope: This is the first of two lectures that deal explicitly with the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Within 300 years, the religion moved from being a small group of Jesus's lower-class Jewish followers in Jerusalem to being a world religion that commanded the attention and, eventually, the respect of the highest echelons of Roman society and government. How did that happen?

This lecture considers the earliest phases of the Christian mission by exploring the missionary strategy and message as reflected in the writings of one our most well known Christian missionaries, the apostle Paul, and in the New Testament Book of Acts. Here, we will consider what Christian evangelists told people to convince them to abandon their pagan religions and to accept the God of Jesus and the death and Resurrection of Jesus for salvation. In particular, we will examine the early Christians' claim that miracles demonstrated the truth of their message.

Outline

I. To this point in the course, we have seen how Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, starting with the historical Jesus, then with the proclamation of his death and Resurrection by his followers. We have also considered how Christianity separated off from its Jewish roots to become an anti-Jewish religion over the first few centuries of its existence.

II. Related to the separation of Christianity from its Jewish roots was its attraction to those of non-Jewish extraction. In this lecture, we will begin to consider Christianity's relationship with the Greco-Roman world at large.

A. In particular, for the next two lectures, we will consider the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world.

B. Our consideration will be driven by an overarching question: How did a small band of Jesus's lower-class Jewish followers in Jerusalem manage to create a world religion that commanded the

respect of the highest echelons of Roman society and government, within 300 years?

III. We can begin by discounting the view commonly propounded, still today, that Christianity just happened to emerge in a world that was suffering spiritual malaise, that the time was ripe for a new religion to pick up where all the others had failed.

- **A.** Recent scholarship has shown that the period of Christianity's spread, the second and third centuries, represented a time of religious fervor and excitement, a revival of religious interests, rather than a widespread spiritual malaise.
- **B.** Moreover, it would be wrong to consider only what was unique about Christianity to see why it succeeded when so many other religions failed. For Christianity to succeed, it obviously had to relate to people and their views; it had to make sense to people; it had to speak in the common religious idiom, not in a completely foreign tongue.
- **C.** In our reflections of what made Christianity so attractive to people that they would be willing to give up their old religions to embrace it, we will need to consider both what about Christianity was like and what about it was unlike other religious traditions in the Roman world.

IV. We will begin our reflections in this lecture by looking at the two earliest sources we have for the Christian mission, the apostle Paul and the Book of Acts.

- **A.** In Paul's own letters, he indicates that he worked in major urban areas through Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (modern-day Turkey and Greece) to establish communities of Christians.
  - **1.** He does not ever say that he engaged in open-air evangelism or tent revivals.
  - **2.** Instead, it appears that he met people to preach to them by going into a new city, opening up a business (possibly a leather goods shop), and using it as a point of contact to meet people (1 Thes. 2:9–12).
- **B.** Throughout his letters, Paul gives several hints concerning what he said to potential converts.

1. His audience consisted of pagans; thus, he first had to convince them that their worship was pointless, because the pagan gods didn't really exist (1 Thes. 1:9–10).
2. Moreover, the one true God had sent his Son into the world to die for the wrongdoing of which everyone was guilty. For people to have a right standing before God, therefore, and to be saved when the imminent day of judgment arrived, they needed to believe in the one true God and trust in the death of his Son.
3. In other words, Paul preached a message of coming judgment and salvation through Christ. This was an apocalyptic message (1 Cor. 15:3–4).
4. The truth of Paul's message was proved by the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Moreover, there are indications in other letters of Paul that the people he converted believed that his message was authenticated by miraculous deeds he performed (2 Cor. 12:12).

C. Much of this is consistent with the accounts of the missionary activities of the apostles found in the Book of Acts.

1. This account was written decades after the events that it narrates. It appears to contain some legendary exaggerations about the effect of the Christian mission (for example, when many, many thousands convert in Jerusalem in the first months of the Christian mission).
2. In its essentials, however, it agrees in many respects with Paul's accounts: The apostles proclaim their faith to unbelievers; they are said to do miracles that validate their message; and people convert as a result (cf. Acts. 2:31; 4:4).
3. Moreover, the mission is said to be more successful among Gentiles than Jews, who, therefore, had to give up their worship of pagan gods and accept the God of Jesus to become his follower.

D. One gets a similar message from later accounts of the Christian mission in the legendary Acts of the Apostles of the second and third centuries, for example, the so-called Acts of John, where many people convert to follow Jesus when they see the powerful miracles of his followers.

V. In sum, the earliest Christian missionaries spread their religion by proclaiming Christ as the Son of the one and only true God who had brought salvation to the world and would bring salvation from the coming judgment

A. Their words were persuasive, in part, because they were believed to be able to perform divinely inspired miracles as verification of what they said.

B. It is impossible for historians to say, as historians, that Jesus's apostles really did such things, but it is possible to say that they were *believed* to have done such things. In the next lecture, we will explore further why belief in such miraculous doings was so central to the advance of the Christian mission.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 2.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapter 19.

Supplementary Reading:

Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Ramsey Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*.

Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why would the accounts of miraculous deeds prove a successful missionary tool for Christians working among pagan worshippers of many gods?

2. Can you explain why Christianity might overtake pagan religions at a time when they were flourishing (rather than when they were in decline)?

Lecture Ten
The Christianization of the Roman Empire

Scope: In this lecture, we will move into the periods of the Christian mission after Paul to see how far and quickly the religion spread, the reasons for its success, and its ultimate reach to the upper echelons of the Roman government, before becoming, finally, the official religion of the empire by the late fourth century. We will see the role played by the claims for the miraculous in the Christian mission and, in particular, the unique aspect of Christianity as an *exclusivistic* religion that claimed it was right and, as a consequence, all other religions were wrong. The lecture will end by considering the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in the beginning of the fourth century and the enormous implications this conversion had for the future of the Christian religion.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we began to see how the earliest Christians spread their religion throughout the Roman Empire.

- **A.** It was largely spread by word of mouth, as Christians tried to convince their pagan friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances in the essence of the Christian message.
- **B.** This message was believed to be validated by the miraculous deeds performed by Jesus's apostles.
- **C.** In this lecture, we will consider further aspects of the Christian mission: how far and quickly the religion spread, the reasons for its success, and its ultimate reach to the upper echelons of the Roman government, before becoming, finally, the official religion of the empire by the late fourth century.

II. The Christian religion appears to have spread by fits and starts but steadily over the first three centuries.

- **A.** The statistics are hard to come by, because we lack adequate sources for firm numbers.

B. Clearly, Christianity started off simply as a small band of lower-class peasants in Jerusalem, possibly 20 to 100 people, who had been followers of Jesus during his life and continued to believe in him after his death.

C. It is difficult to know how many people this small band of followers converted in the early years, but we do know that small Christian communities were started throughout the entire Mediterranean over the decades that followed.

D. Over the course of 300 years, the religion had grown to be about five percent of the population of the empire, or some three million adherents.

E. That rate of growth does not require massive conversions but simply a steady stream of converts. It represents a growth of about 40 percent every 10 years (which happens to be the growth rate of the Mormon Church over the course of the 20th century; see Rodney Stark).

F. This growth was not achieved by massive evangelistic campaigns but by social networking, as one person who converted would then convert his spouse and (some of his) children, neighbors, and friends; over time, each of the converts would do the same.

G. The enormous change came with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. Then, the church took off by leaps and bounds so that by the end of the century, fully half of the empire called itself Christian.

H. It was Theodosius I (emperor, 374–395 C.E.) who made Christianity the "official" state religion at the end of the fourth century, outlawing pagan religious practices.

III. Why, though, was Christianity so successful in the earlier years and throughout the second and third centuries, before Constantine?

A. It is important to recall that Christianity's success must have involved the way it related its message to the pagans that it converted.

1. As earlier indicated, there is nothing to suggest a widespread spiritual malaise throughout the empire in this period. On the contrary, religious cults and practices appear to have experienced a serious resurgence. Why, then, would

Christianity succeed in displacing so many religions over time?

2. To answer that question, we must remember that pagan religions were principally concerned with life in the present world, acquiring what is needed and wanted in life through powerful deities who can provide what humans are unable to provide for themselves: rain for the crops, personal health, healing from sickness, power over evil, victory over enemies.
3. This can explain why the reports of the apostolic miracles (and those of Jesus) played such a major role in the Christian mission: These showed that the Christian God was more powerful than all others; those who came to believe that, in order to receive the benefits of that power for themselves, needed to abandon their old gods to worship this one.

B. This intimates another aspect of the Christian message that contributed to its success: its exclusivity.

1. None of the other religions in the empire was exclusivistic, not even Judaism.
2. Christianity, though, proclaimed an exclusive attachment to the one God, who was jealous and would brook no rivals. Following him meant abandoning all others.
3. For this reason, Christianity destroyed all the other religions while promoting its own. In this, it was unique among the religions of antiquity, which explains a good deal of its success.

C. The exclusive claims of the religion were matched by the fierce devotion of some of its followers. This, too, may have accounted for Christianity's success.

1. Little of such exclusive devotion could be found in pagan religions.
2. But some Christians were willing to stay true to their religious commitments even when faced with torture and death. According to early Christian authors, such as Justin and Tertullian, this made an impression on bystanders. In Tertullian's words, "The blood of the martyrs is seed."

IV. Christianity grew at a steady pace over the decades, up to the early fourth century, when Constantine converted and changed everything.

A. The details of Constantine's conversion are sketchy, and the surviving accounts are legendary.

B. The most well known account—allegedly described by Constantine himself—involves his dream the night before his significant battle with his rival for power, Maxentius, in 312 C.E., in which he saw the sign of the cross and was told, "by this, conquer."

V. The steady growth of Christianity over the decades of the second and third centuries was largely based on a message of exclusivistic devotion to the Christian God, backed by reports of acts of miraculous power demonstrating the religion's superiority to all others. When the Roman emperor finally converted to this once-persecuted faith, it was on its way to becoming the religion of the empire and, from there, the most significant religion in the history of Western civilization and culture.

Essential Reading:

Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Ramsey Macmullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*.

Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

Supplementary Reading:

John Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 2.

Questions to Consider:

1. What would the world be like today if the vast majority of religions were inclusivistic—as they were in the Roman world—rather than exclusivistic? Would this have any effect on social and political conflicts?
2. Try to mount arguments for Constantine's conversion being (a) a good thing and (b) a bad thing for the future of Christianity.

Lecture Eleven

The Early Persecutions of the State

Scope: This lecture is the first of four dealing with persecution and martyrdom in the early church. As Christianity spread, it was widely opposed, first, on the local level by antagonistic mobs and, later, officially by Roman imperial authorities. Why were Christians seen as problematic and singled out for punishment?

In this lecture, we will examine a graphic account of Christian persecution from the mid-second century (the martyrdom of Christians in Lyons and Vienne) and move from there to consider both why Christians were persecuted and what their reactions to opposition were. En route, we will unravel several "myths" about early Christian persecution (for example, that Christianity was "illegal" and that Christians were always in hiding). The lecture will conclude by considering the scattered evidence for the emperors' involvement in early persecution (under Nero, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius).

Outline

I. In the previous two lectures, we saw how Christianity spread throughout the Roman world.

- **A.** In those lectures, I argued that the religion spread by word of mouth and proved attractive to some pagans because the Christian God appeared to be so powerful, that is, capable of doing great miracles for his people.
- **B.** Moreover, the exclusive claim of the Christians—that their God alone was true and all other gods were false, that their views alone were right and all others, wrong—was unique in that world and facilitated the spread of Christianity, because it necessarily destroyed the other religions when pagans converted.
- **C.** It would be a mistake to think that the conversion of the empire happened quickly and unproblematically. In fact, there were major obstacles, seen in the circumstance that most pagans rejected the Christian message, finding it offensive and worthy of violent opposition.

D. In this lecture and the three that follow, we will consider the persecution of Christians throughout the empire during the first three centuries.

E. We have numerous accounts of Christian persecution, some by Christian authors who celebrated the torture and martyrdom of the faithful as signs of divine favor, others by Roman authors who considered the Christians' refusal to give up their religion in the face of torture and death to be reprehensible and idiotic.

II. We can begin our reflections by considering one of the most graphic and significant firsthand reports of a significant persecution against Christians, which occurred in the towns of Vienne and Lyons in Gaul (modern-day France) in the middle of the second century.

A. The account is preserved for us in a letter written by the Christians who survived the persecution to Christians in Asia Minor and preserved for us in the writings of the fourth-century church historian Eusebius.

B. The account indicates that the driving force behind the persecution was the devil, who inspired the mobs to oppose Christians and deprive them of public privileges and civil rights.

C. The anger of the mobs against the Christians increased, and they physically assaulted the Christians and finally urged the authorities to have those professing faith in Christ to be arrested.

D. The general unacceptability of the Christians was heightened by the claims of some of their slaves that Christians engaged in highly immoral and illegal activities, including cannibalistic practices and incestuous orgies.

E. We then have an account of the arrest, trials, torture, and martyrdom of several Christians, including a church leader named Sanctus and a woman named Blandina.

1. The narrative provides graphic details of the public torments that these Christians endured (beatings, floggings, the rack, the iron seat).

2. It also stresses their absolute refusal to abandon their Christian faith, despite such horrible suffering.

3. Eventually, these Christians were put to death by being thrown to wild beasts; their bodies were left on display as an

act of further humiliation, until they were burned and their ashes cast into the river.

III. This account raises a number of disturbing questions about the early persecution of the Christians.

A. What motivated the pagan opponents to treat Christians in this way?

B. How involved were the civil authorities? Why did they go along with the mob mentality? Was the religion seen as illegal? If so, for what reasons?

C. What were the actual charges against the Christians, and could any of them have been true?

D. How often did this sort of thing happen? Was it going on all the time, all over the empire?

E. How did Christians react? Did they all willingly face torture and martyrdom for their faith? Or did some recant to save their skins?

F. What drove those Christians who willingly underwent such public humiliation, torment, and death? Why were they so willing to die for their faith?

G. These and similar questions go on and on. I will try to address them in what remains of this lecture and the ones to follow.

IV. To begin our reflections, I would like to dispel some common myths about early Christian persecution.

A. Myth 1: Christianity was an illegal religion in the empire, constantly opposed by the Roman emperors. In point of fact, it was never declared illegal by an emperor until the middle of the third century. The emperors almost never were involved with Christian persecution.

B. Myth 2: During the first three centuries, Christians were everywhere hunted down and martyred for their faith. In fact, in most times and places, Christianity was tolerated, just as other religions were.

C. Myth 3: Christians had to go into hiding in the Roman catacombs to avoid detection. In fact, Christians did not have to go into hiding, and they certainly did not set up camp in the Roman catacombs.

D. Myth 4: Many, many thousands of Christians died in the early persecutions. In fact, the number was probably in the hundreds.

E. Myth 5: Christians were opposed because they worshipped Jesus as God, which was seen as a threat to the Roman belief that the emperor was god. In fact, there was no difficulty in worshipping Jesus as God. The problem was not whom the Christians worshipped, but whom they refused to worship: the Roman gods.

V. It is useful to consider some factual information about the course of "official" persecution of the early Christians.

A. The first emperor to be involved with persecutions was Nero (c. 64 A.D.), who used Christians as scapegoats for the fire in Rome that he evidently started himself.

1. It is important to note, however, that in this case, Christians were condemned for arson, not for being Christian.
2. Moreover, this persecution was localized to Rome. It may, however, have set a precedent for later civil authorities.

B. The next emperor known to be involved with persecutions was Trajan (c. 112 A.D.), who authorized a persecution of Christians in the province of Bythinia when Pliny was governor.

1. In this case, Christians were persecuted simply because they claimed to be Christian.
2. But anyone who recanted was excused. This shows that having been a Christian was not a crime; refusing to stop being one was.

C. Persecutions occurred sporadically from then onward (for example, under Marcus Aurelius—thus, the letter of Lyons and Vienne).

D. It was not until Christianity had grown into a sizable minority in the empire in the middle of the third century that any emperor made an empire-wide attempt to eliminate the religion.

1. This was the emperor Decius in 249 C.E.
2. But even this declaration of the religion as illegal lasted only a little more than two years (Decius died in 251).

E. The most significant attempt to wipe out Christianity came at the beginning of the fourth century with the emperor Diocletian, whose "Great Persecution" lasted several years, until Constantine

became emperor, converted to the faith, and brought an end to imperial opposition to Christianity.

VI. In sum, Christianity was a minority religion throughout these years and faced sporadic, local, and occasionally violent opposition, with occasional "official" backing. In the lectures to follow, we will consider more fully the questions of why pagans opposed this new religion and how Christians reacted to this opposition.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 3.

Everett Ferguson, *Church and State in the Early Church* (especially the articles by de Ste. Crois and Sherwin-White).

Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

Supplementary Reading:

H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why do you imagine that a set of religions that was otherwise so tolerant (paganism) would be so intolerant of the Christian religion?
2. Why do you suppose that the Christian persecutions appear to have sprung from the ground up (that is, from the pagan mobs), rather than from the top down (that is, from the imperial authorities)?

Lecture Twelve
The Causes of Christian Persecution

Scope: This lecture provides a historical sketch of the course of persecution from the first to the third centuries, asking what motivated the two major kinds of violence against Christians: (a) grassroots, mob uprisings, which sometimes compelled official involvement, and (b) top-down persecutions ordered by the state. The earliest Christian *martyrology* ("account of a martyr"), the Martyrdom of Polycarp, will guide our reflections. Among other things, we will see that state-sanctioned persecutions did not appear until the middle of the third century. In particular, the lecture will consider several key reasons for pagan opposition to the religion, including the sense that Christians were stirring up the wrath of the gods and that they were engaged in antisocial and licentious activities.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we began to discuss the persecution of the early Christians and tried to dispel some of the myths surrounding their opposition in the early centuries of the church.

- **A.** There, we saw that the early persecutions tended to be local, occasional, and sporadic, rather than empire-wide, constant, and systematic.
- **B.** Moreover, we saw that by and large, persecutions began at the grassroots level, as non-Christians opposed the Christians, sometimes violently, and sometimes took their complaints to officials, who then took matters into their own hands.
- **C.** But why were Christians seen as offensive in that world, which otherwise seemed to be so tolerant of a vast array of religious beliefs and sensitivities? That is the question we will explore in this lecture.

II. We can begin by examining another martyrological account from the period—this one, in fact, is the earliest written account outside of the New Testament—of a Christian martyr, the famous bishop of Smyrna (Asia Minor), Polycarp, who was executed around 156 A.D.

A. The Martyrdom of Polycarp comes to us, again, in the form of a letter, this time from the Christians of Smyrna to those of another town, Philomelium.

B. The author of the letter indicates that he wants to show how Polycarp's martyrdom was "in conformity with the Gospel."

1. Even though this is an eyewitness account, it is difficult to separate historical fact from theological fiction here.

2. This is principally because the story is told in a way to emphasize the similarities of Polycarp's death to the death of Jesus in many of its details. For example, Polycarp predicts his death, he is betrayed by one of his own, the officer opposed to him is named Herod, he rides into town on a donkey, and so on.

C. Still, there is a historical kernel to this intriguing account, and it can be used to help us understand a bit more about why and how non-Christians opposed the followers of Christ in the early centuries of the church.

1. The account stresses that others were tortured to death before Polycarp.

2. It then goes on to detail the burning desire of the pagan crowds to have the leader of the Christians arrested and put on trial.

3. The arresting officials try to persuade Polycarp to acknowledge the divinity of the Roman gods, but he refuses.

4. When brought into the arena before the Roman proconsul, Polycarp is again urged to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor and to reject the "atheists" (that is, the Christians, who are "atheists" in that they do not accept the worship of the gods).

5. When Polycarp steadfastly refuses, the proconsul urges him to persuade the masses.

6. But Polycarp remains firm, despite threats of torture, because, as he says, the brief sufferings awaiting him pale in comparison with the eternal torments reserved for those who reject Christ.

7. The crowds are incensed and urge his death. Polycarp is then burned at the stake. The narrator indicates that before his

death, God worked miracles to demonstrate the truth of the gospel and to validate Polycarp as a true witness to it.

III. This account helps to illustrate several important historical facts about why the early Christians were persecuted.

A. The religion was not understood to be illegal per se. Polycarp could have been spared had he simply recanted (unlike other crimes, for which expressing regret does not relieve one from punishment).

B. Persecutions occurred because the pagan mobs opposed the Christians.

1. Their opposition appears to be rooted in a fear of what the gods would do to communities that harbored their opponents (see 12:2).
2. This coincides with other evidence from early sources, including the famous lines from the Christian apologist ("defender of the faith") Tertullian: "They [the pagans] think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lion!'" (*Apology* 40).
3. This position makes considerable sense when one remembers that pagans saw the gods as their helpers and defenders against disaster; in exchange for their protection, the gods were to be worshipped in proper ways.
4. This is also why Pliny could use a "litmus test" to see if someone were a Christian worthy of death or not: If the accused would sacrifice to the emperor, he was released as not deserving punishment.
5. The problem, then, was not that Christians worshipped the Christian God or Christ; it was, instead, that they refused to worship the pagan gods.
6. This problem can be seen with particular clarity in the account of the acts of the Scillitan martyrs.

C. Support for the dangerous aspects of Christianity was found in the charges commonly labeled against Christians that they engaged in

immoral religious ceremonies that included incestuous orgies and cannibalism.

1. These charges were already seen in the account of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne.
2. They can be seen even more clearly in the charges leveled against Christians by a mid-second–century philosopher named Fronto, the tutor of Marcus Aurelius, who details the Christians' nefarious practices in graphic detail.
3. The charges may seem odd to people today, but they make sense given what we know about early Christians, who met in secret (outsiders weren't allowed in) and often at night (because most of them were lower class and had to work all day every day); who called one another "brother" and "sister" and exchanged kisses as greetings (incest?!); and who then ate and drank the body and blood of the Son of God (cannibalism?!).

IV. There were numerous motivating factors behind the persecution of the early Christians. Principally, the persecutions were driven by the sense that Christians had offended the gods and were an immoral presence in society. Occasionally, the mob reaction against Christians was taken to the authorities, who acted in what they saw as the best interest of their people and tried to make Christians recant their beliefs or pay the horrific consequences.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 3.

Everett Ferguson, *Church and State in the Early Church* (especially the articles by de Ste. Crois and Sherwin-White).

Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

Supplementary Reading:

W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In considering the accounts of early Christian persecutions, why do you suppose the state officials usually seemed less eager than the mobs to subject the Christians to torture and death?
2. Consider the charges leveled against Christians. Can you think of other instances throughout history, or even today, in which "opponents" of a group have been tarnished with claims of crass and flagrant immorality? What is one to make of such claims?

Lecture Thirteen
Christian Reactions to Persecution

Scope: In this lecture, we try to understand how Christians reacted to their persecution at the hands of pagan mobs and local authorities. We will see that many Christians recanted their faith in the face of persecution, but many others stayed faithful to what they believed to be the truth. We will use the moving tale of the passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch to guide our reflections. From these texts, we will see that many Christians were willing to face torture and death because they believed that doing so would ensure them an afterlife of eternal bliss, whereas those who refused to accept the faith would face eternal torment. Moreover, some Christians believed that in suffering martyrdom, they were imitating the example set for them by Christ, their Lord.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we saw some of the reasons for the violent opposition to Christians throughout the empire.

- **A.** Christians were seen as a threat to society because they refused to worship the state gods. Disasters that struck could be seen by pagans, then, as divine retribution for cities that harbored such "atheists."
- **B.** Moreover, Christians were thought to be morally reprehensible and, therefore, socially dangerous.
- **C.** Christians, of course, denied that they were dangerous, and many of them refused to recant their beliefs even in the face of violent opposition and concerted official efforts.
- **D.** In this lecture, we will shift from considering the persecution from the pagan perspective (why did pagans act this way?) to the Christian perspective (how did Christians react to their opposition?).

II. We have already seen that some Christians recanted of their faith in the face of violent opposition.

A. This is clearly stated in the letter of the Christians of Vienne and Lyons.

B. It can also be seen in the Martyrdom of Polycarp in the story of Quintus, a Christian who voluntarily offered himself as a martyr, until he became terrified of the consequences and recanted.

C. We know of some Christian groups who opposed martyrdom on theological grounds—that Christ died precisely so that his followers would not have to do so. These Christians maintained that it was God's will to do (in bad faith) what the authorities insisted on and, thus, live.

D. It is difficult to know how many Christians recanted or pretended to recant in the face of physical torment.

E. Most of the surviving accounts are written by Christians who celebrate martyrdom and want to show the supernatural strength given the martyrs in the face of their death, as seen in the accounts of the martyrs of Vienne and Lyons and of the martyrdom of Polycarp.

III. A similar message of a Christian stalwart bearing up in the face of death can be seen in the powerful account of the martyrdom of Perpetua.

A. Perpetua was a 22-year-old recent mother and new convert to Christianity, living in North Africa around 203 A.D.

B. The story of her martyrdom for the faith is based in part on a firsthand account—her own diary kept while in prison—in which she records what happened to her and her fellow Christian martyrs, her reactions, her fears, and a series of visions she had while awaiting her death.

C. One of the most gripping elements of the story is her reaction to her poor father, a pagan who does not understand why she is insisting on dying for the faith and who tries in vain to get her to see reason—for his sake, the sake of her child, and for her own sake.

D. She spurns his pleas, however, relinquishes her child, and goes to her death willingly, even eagerly.

E. The account of her death in the arena is then narrated by an editor who took her diary and incorporated it into a longer martyrology, popular down through the ages until today.

IV. Why were such Christians as Blandina in Lyons, Polycarp in Smyrna, and Perpetua in North Africa so firm in refusing to recant, so stalwart in the face of death?

A. We can never know their personal reasons. But we do have some indications from the writings about them (by the Christians left behind) concerning why Christians preferred public torture, humiliation, and death to release and long life.

B. It appears that many Christians were convinced that as bad as the torments of the present were, they were not nearly so bad as the torments awaiting those who rejected Christ in the world to come (as explicitly stated in the Martyrdom of Polycarp and the letter of the churches of Lyons and Vienne).

1. This view is rooted in a theodicy that maintained that God would reward the righteous but punish the unrighteous.
2. This message became one of the central features of Christian preaching and related closely to its exclusivistic claims. Not only were Christians right in what they believed, but those who chose not to agree would be punished with horrific torments eternally.

C. Moreover, some Christians saw that a violent death at the hands of the authorities was a way to imitate Christ, who had died a similar death.

1. This view can be seen most clearly in the writings of one of the first Christians known to be martyred after the New Testament period, Ignatius of Antioch.
2. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch, arrested for Christian activities, and sent to Rome to be thrown to the wild beasts.
3. En route, he wrote six letters to various churches that had sent representatives to greet him on the way. He wrote one other letter to the Christians in Rome, urging them not to interfere with the proceedings against him once he arrived, because it was by a violent death that he would be united with Christ and, thus, "attain to God."
4. The longing of Ignatius for violent death may seem pathological to modern ears, but it was only logical for him:

This world was of no importance to him; what mattered was the other world of God, which he could attain by imitating the martyrdom of Christ.

V. It is difficult to know how many Christians actually had to face death in this way (because the writings about the martyrs presuppose so many survivors, we can assume that not many were actually killed).

A. Some evidently recanted of their Christian faith—or at least pretended to do so—when put to the test.

B. Others, though, submitted themselves to public torment and death, because in doing so they were escaping the real and eternal suffering that would come to non-believers in the afterlife and because in dying this way, they could imitate their Lord and master, Christ.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 3.

Everett Ferguson, *Church and State in the Early Church* (especially the articles by de Ste. Crois and Sherwin-White).

Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self*.

Supplementary Reading:

H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Can you imagine ways in which the persecution and martyrdom of Christians may have actually helped the Christian mission?

2. Why do you suppose that such people as Perpetua or Ignatius—who presumably had so much to offer people in this world and who could have no doubt led happy lives here—were so eager to sacrifice their bodies and leave this world?

Lecture Fourteen
The Early Christian Apologists

Scope: In the middle of the second century, an elite group of Christian intellectuals emerged who decided to take on their cultured despisers from among the pagans and to defend Christianity against the charges of atheism and rank immorality commonly leveled against it. These Christian *apologists* ("defenders of the faith") wrote open letters, often to the emperor, explaining the true nature of the religion, showing that the charges against it were groundless, and urging that Christians be allowed to worship their God in their own (socially innocuous) ways.

In this lecture, we will consider these strategies by looking at one of the most interesting apologists of the late second century, Athenagoras, whose writing has survived till today and can show us the ways Christians defended themselves against the attacks of those in power.

Outline

I. In the three previous lectures, we have discussed the persecution and martyrdom of Christians in the Roman Empire.

- **A.** We have seen some of the reasons that Christians were persecuted.
  - **1.** Because they failed to worship the state gods, they were sometimes seen as the cause of disasters that occasionally struck.
  - **2.** They were suspected of engaging in antisocial and flagrantly immoral behavior.
- **B.** We have also seen how Christians reacted to their persecution, with some Christians recanting their faith to avoid prosecution and others remaining committed to the point of torture and death, thinking that the pains they suffered in the present were nothing in comparison to the joys that would be theirs after death.
- **C.** In this lecture, we will move on to consider how Christians defended themselves against the charges of atheism and immorality commonly leveled against them. In particular, we will

look at the "reasoned defenses" made by Christian intellectuals to their cultured despisers among the pagans.

II. The treatises written by these Christians are usually called *apologies*, the Greek term for "defense." Christian apologies began to appear as a literary genre in the middle of the second century, but there were precedents for them already in the New Testament period.

A. The book of 1 Peter is often thought of as an early piece of Christian apology.

1. The book was written near the end of the first century to a group of Christians experiencing severe persecution (4:12).

2. It appears that the persecution started at the grassroots level, among friends and neighbors opposed to those who converted to Christianity (4:3).

3. The readers are urged to give their persecutors no grounds for opposition (4:14–15) and to be ready to give a reasoned "defense" (*apologia*) for their beliefs (3:14–16).

B. The Book of Acts is also thought by some to be an apology; it was written to a Roman official (Theophilus) to explain that Christians had never done anything contrary to Roman law or custom requiring punishment.

III. It was not until the mid-second century, however, that intellectuals began converting to the faith and writing reasoned defenses of their religion to try to prevent persecutions.

A. These were often "open letters" written to the emperor or other leading Roman officials (although there is considerable question whether anyone high in the administration would have bothered reading them).

B. We have already met several of these authors, such as Justin Martyr in Rome and Tertullian in Carthage, North Africa.

IV. One particularly interesting apology came from an otherwise virtually unknown author, Athenagoras, living and writing in Athens around 177 A.D.

A. Athenagoras addressed his apology to the joint emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, just at the time of the persecution at Lyons and Viennes that we have already considered.

B. He takes on the arguments against the Christians one by one, using his considerable rhetorical skills to show their absurdity.

C. He argues that Christians cannot be "atheists," because in fact, they believe in the God who created all things. In other words, they are not *materialists*, as were some Greek philosophers who really did not believe in any super-mundane beings.

1. Moreover, this God is in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that Christians do acknowledge the "true" Gods.

2. In addition, they affirm the existence of other divine beings (angels and the like).

D. The objection that Christians do not worship certain state gods is likewise absurd, because different gods are worshipped by different peoples in different states, which meant that Christians should not be singled out for persecution.

E. In addition, the charges of immorality—especially cannibalism and infanticide—are ridiculous for anyone who knows about the Christian faith.

1. In fact, not only do Christians believe in not committing adultery but also in not thinking lustful thoughts.

2. They are committed to the principle of not killing, as well as not observing violence (such as in the gladiator games) and not exposing infants.

3. In a nice rhetorical twist, Athenagoras claims that pagans charge Christians with doing what the pagans' own gods are said to do in their myths (commit murders, adultery, and the like).

F. Athenagoras's conclusion is that it is senseless to persecute the Christians simply for taking the name Christian, when they have done nothing illegal or wrong but, in fact, are both theologically right and morally upright.

V. These arguments are repeated throughout the various apologists, along with several others that became standard fare.

A. Christians are not a threat to society; instead, because they alone are holy and close to God, it is their prayers that preserve society. They are, in fact, the salt of the Earth.

B. For that matter, Christianity alone is true religion.

1. It is proved true by its miracle-working leaders.

2. Its truth claims are demonstrated by "proof from prophecy," in that the predictions of the ancient Hebrew prophets came to be fulfilled by the life of Jesus.
3. Thus, Christianity is far more ancient than anything found among the pagan religions; it is rooted in the teachings of Moses, who lived 800 years before Plato and 400 years before Homer—key figures for pagan notions about the gods.

C. Therefore, the state should leave Christians in peace to worship as they choose. In fact, the apologists argued—in anticipation of ideas promulgated many centuries later under a completely different set of conditions—that there should be a separation of religion and politics, church and state. This argument never caught on in antiquity, especially once the empire converted and the government took up the Christian cause against the pagans and Jews.

VI. As we said, starting in the mid-second century, some intellectuals converted to the Christian faith and wrote apologies in its defense, proclaiming its theological superiority, its moral virtue, and its social value in an attempt to bring the persecutions to an end.

A. These intellectual defenses were not themselves effective in averting persecution.

B. As the writings of the first serious Christian intellectuals, however, the apologies became important for later Christian theological and ethical reflection, as the religion continued to spread its appeal throughout the Roman world.

Essential Reading:

———, *After the New Testament*, chapter 4.

Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapter 26.

Supplementary Reading:

Arthur Droge, *Moses or Homer*.

Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Suppose you were a Roman pagan of the mid-second century who considered the Christian faith socially dangerous. How might you

respond to the views and arguments of the Christian apologists? Why would you not find them convincing?

2. Why do the apologists' arguments sound so commonsensical to many people today?

Lecture Fifteen

The Diversity of Early Christian Communities

Scope: This is the first of four lectures that will consider the wide-ranging theological diversity of early Christianity and the internal conflicts that emerged as Christians tried to determine once and for all the "right" beliefs and practices. Contrary to what one might think, early believers in Jesus held an enormous variety of beliefs: Some claimed there were two or more gods, some insisted that the world was created by an evil deity, some argued that Jesus was not really human or not really divine, some maintained that Jesus's death had nothing to do with salvation, and others claimed that he never actually died.

In this lecture, we will begin to consider early Christian diversity by examining the views of the opponents of the apostle Paul (for example, in Galatia and Corinth), people who claimed to represent the true faith as proclaimed by Jesus. We will then move to look at forms of Christianity outside the New Testament, such as those found in the opponents of Ignatius of Antioch and non-canonical books, including the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in modern times.

Outline

I. In our course to this point, we have considered a number of significant external features of early Christianity: its relationship to the Jewish religion from which it emerged, its spread throughout the Roman world, its persecution, and the defenses that it made to local and official opposition.

II. In this lecture, we shift our focus to internal developments in the religion. This will be the first of four lectures dealing with key aspects of the diverse character of early Christianity.

III. Christianity in the modern world is extremely diverse (cf. the Greek Orthodox, Pentecostals, Anglicans, Southern Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Roman Catholics!). But it was even more diverse in the first three centuries of the church.

- **A.** People who called themselves Christians were identified by others as Christians and were persecuted as Christians; they held an incredibly wide range of beliefs about God, the material world, Christ, Scripture, and nearly everything else.
- **B.** In some senses, the religion was so diverse that it may make more sense to speak of early *Christianities* rather than early *Christianity*.

IV. We do not need to wait until the second century to see these developments emerge, however. They are evident already in the New Testament period, the first century.

- **A.** This can be seen in the range of views represented among the opponents (who were themselves Christian) of the apostle Paul, our earliest Christian author.
  - **1.** He wrote his letter to the Galatians to oppose Christian missionaries who believed that to be full members of the people of God, Gentiles needed to become Jewish and adopt the laws God had given his people through Moses, including the requirement of circumcision. (These laws were, after all, presented in the Old Testament as part of an "eternal" covenant, not a temporary one.)
  - **2.** Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians to oppose Christian leaders who thought that believers had already experienced a spiritual resurrection and, thus, were reaping the full benefits of salvation in the here and now—making their physical lives of no importance to God. (In other words, people could behave in any way they chose and use their bodies for any purposes they wished.)
  - **3.** These opponents—and all the others Paul and his contemporaries had to face—naturally believed that they were right and Paul was wrong. But they lost these arguments, and no one bothered to preserve their writings.
- **B.** Even among the writings of the New Testament—that is, the books that later came to be regarded as Scripture and were placed within the same canon—there is a remarkable range of belief expressed.
  - **1.** The differences among the New Testament books are usually overlooked, because they all occur now within the same canon of Scripture and are treated as one book (with, therefore, one point of view), rather than 27 books, by different authors,

writing at different times to different audiences, and embodying different perspectives.

2. But there are important distinctions. What was Jesus's message? The answer depends on whether you read Mark or John. Should the Jewish Law be accepted by Jesus's followers? That depends on whether you read Paul or Matthew.

V. After the books of the New Testament were written, the diversity of Christian beliefs become even more evident.

A. This can be seen, for example, in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, whom we have met already as one of the first Christian martyrs.

1. In his seven surviving letters, written mainly to churches of Asia Minor that he had come to know en route to his martyrdom, he is particularly concerned with "heretical" forms of belief that were threatening the communities.
2. In particular, he appears to be concerned about *Judaizing* Christians who urged believers to accept the Jewish Law (cf. Paul's enemies in Galatia) and *docetic* Christians who insisted that Christ was not a real flesh-and-blood human being but, as fully divine, only appeared to be human (from the Greek word *doceo*, to "seem" or "appear").

B. The diversity can also be seen in books taken as Scripture by other Christian groups that did not, however, make it into the New Testament. As just one example, we can consider the Gospel of Thomas.

1. This book was discovered in 1945 near the village of Nag Hammadi, Egypt, along with a cache of other "heretical" writings, known collectively as the Nag Hammadi library.
2. The book is significant because it contains 114 sayings of Jesus (and nothing else), many of which are completely unlike what we find in the New Testament (others of them are very similar to the New Testament sayings).
3. Some of the sayings presuppose a view that the world is an inherently bad place in which human spirits are entrapped, imprisoned; that they need to escape this material world to find their salvation; and that this escape can come only by uncovering the secret teachings of Jesus.

4. The opening lines are particularly instructive (sayings 1–2): The way to have eternal life is by correctly interpreting the secrets divulged by Jesus.
5. This obviously stands in sharp contrast with Paul and the Gospels of the New Testament, which maintained that it was by Jesus's death and Resurrection, not his teachings, that one can find eternal life.
6. Yet this book, and others found with it in the Nag Hammadi library, were accepted as sacred truth by the Christians who read and preserved it.

VI. In sum, early Christianity was an extremely diverse phenomenon from the outset, with a wide range of beliefs and practices adhered to by those who claimed to be followers of Jesus. In our next lecture, we will begin to consider some specific Christian groups that we know about from the second century, then move on to discuss how one form of Christianity ended up becoming dominant, deciding what creeds to believe and which books to include in sacred Scripture.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

———, *Lost Scriptures*.

Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels.

Supplementary Reading:

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Try to think of as many "varieties" of Christianity as you can in the modern world. What holds all of these forms of belief together (if anything), and in your opinion, how "different" does a belief have to be before it ceases to be "Christian"?
2. Why has Christianity historically placed such a strong emphasis on "correct belief" (unlike most other religions); are there forms of Christianity that do not do so?

Lecture Sixteen

Christianities of the Second Century

Scope: In this lecture, we will consider the meaning of the terms *orthodoxy* ("right belief") and *heresy* ("choice," that is, the choice not to believe the right beliefs). We will then examine the beliefs of various groups of Christians of the second century, who all claimed to represent the true understanding of the religion but who disagreed, both among themselves and with the group that emerged as victorious from the conflicts to determine what Christians would believe (for example, by producing the creeds still recited in churches today). In particular, we will look at Jewish Christian Ebionites, who insisted on the ongoing validity of the Jewish Law; the Marcionites, who rejected all things Jewish, including the Jewish God; and Gnostics, who believed the material world was evil and that they had the secret knowledge, revealed by Jesus, necessary to escape it.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we began to see the wide internal diversity of the early Christian movement.

- **A.** We saw this diversity in the earliest period of Christianity, for example, in the arguments raised by Paul against his Christian opponents and in some of the books that came to be canonized into the New Testament.
- **B.** This diversity continued and intensified with the passing of time, as we saw in the Judaizing and docetic Christians opposed by Ignatius and in such non-canonical works as the Gospel of Thomas.
- **C.** In this lecture, we will look at several wide-ranging groups of Christians in the second century to compare and contrast the remarkable varieties of belief they evidenced.

II. We can start with a group known to history as the Ebionites, who were Jewish Christians who affirmed the ongoing need of Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, to adhere to the demands of the Jewish Law.

A. We do not know the origin of their name, though it may be rooted in the Hebrew term *Ebyon*, meaning "poor"—possibly because they accepted voluntary poverty, as Jesus did, for the sake of others.

B. We have none of their own writings, but they are described by their opponents as Christians who claimed to follow the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, and to have kept Jewish practices of circumcision, kosher food, Sabbath observance, and the like.

C. Their theology may, in fact, have been the oldest form of Christianity, which maintained that this religion was and always had been Jewish. Followers of Jesus who worshipped his God needed to follow the laws his God had given.

D. As strict monotheists, these Christians insisted that Jesus, the Messiah, was the *man* God had chosen for the salvation of the world by dying on the cross. They did not subscribe to the notions of Jesus's divinity or virgin birth.

E. Why did these Christians not simply read the New Testament to see that they were wrong about such things? Because the New Testament did not yet exist. These Ebonite Christians had other sacred books to support their views.
   1. In particular, they accepted something like our Gospel of Matthew, sometimes called the Gospel of the Nazareans (another name for this, or a similar, group).
   2. And they explicitly rejected the teachings of Paul, whom they saw as a heretic who debased the Jewish Law.

III. Prominent at the same time as the Ebionites was a group of anti-Jewish Christians called the Marcionites.

A. In this case, there is no ambiguity concerning their name: They were followers of a famous philosopher/theologian of the second century named Marcion.

B. Quite opposite of the Ebionites, Marcion and his followers looked on the apostle Paul as the apostle of God par excellence.

C. Paul had emphasized that salvation comes to all people, Jew and Gentile, apart from the Jewish Law. Marcion argued that this demonstrated a split between the salvation of Jesus and the Law of the Jews.

1. He further drew out the logic: The God of Jesus could not be the God who gave the Law. Marcion concluded that there were two different gods.
2. The Jewish God had created the world, called Israel to be his people, and given them his Law. But it was a Law that no one could keep, and the penalty for disobedience was harsh.
3. The God of Jesus stood over against this vengeful God of the Jews, known from the Old Testament. This true God of Jesus did not create the world and had nothing to do with the world before Jesus appeared to save people from this other God.
4. Jesus himself was not a material creature of this world (otherwise, he would belong to the creator God) but only "appeared" to be so. Marcionites were, therefore, docetists.
5. By dying on the cross, Jesus satisfied the requirements of the Jewish God and brought salvation from his grasp.

D. The Marcionites had two books that supported their views, both made by Marcion.

1. The first was a collection of sacred texts—the writings of Paul and a form of the Gospel of Luke, both truncated to remove from them any reference to the God of the Jews or his laws. Marcion removed such references, claiming that they had earlier been "inserted" by false believers into these originally pristine writings.
2. The second was a book called the *Antitheses* ("*Contrary Statements*"), in which Marcion spelled out his views of the differences between the Old Testament God of wrath and the God of Jesus.

E. Clearly the Marcionites (with their two Gods and anti-Jewish views) stood in sharp contrast with the Ebionites (with their one God and affirmation of the Jewish Law).

IV. One other group of Christians from the period is commonly called Gnostic, from the Greek word *gnosis*, because these people believed that "knowledge" (*gnosis*) was the key to salvation.

A. There was a wide range of Gnostic religions in the second century.

B. However, they seem to have held several beliefs in common.

1. Gnostics held that the material world was the result of a cosmic disaster and was not the kind and beneficent creation of the one true God.
2. Instead, according to their myths, there were numerous gods in the divine realm. In a catastrophic event in eternity past, one of the divine beings fell from that realm, captured an element of the divine, and created the material world as a place of imprisonment for it.
3. Some humans have this spark of the divine within them. The goal of the religion is to liberate these divine sparks by delivering to them the knowledge of who they really are, where they came from, and how they can return.
4. In Christian Gnostic systems, Jesus is the one who brings this saving knowledge. He is not really a human from here; he comes from above to deliver the secret teachings that can bring salvation to the divine beings who are entrapped.
5. The chosen ones who then receive his teachings know how to return to their heavenly home.

C. This group was seen to be particularly dangerous to Christians that we might call "proto-orthodox," that is, forerunners of the group that eventually determined what Christians would believe in later centuries. Gnostics were dangerous because they could be found in the proto-orthodox churches, seeing themselves as a spiritual elite who understood the real meaning of the religion that everyone else took literally.

D. Numerous Christian authors wrote against the Gnostics, including some of the authors we have already discussed: Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others.

V. The second century saw a wide range of Christian beliefs, but none of the groups discussed in this lecture established itself as dominant in the religion. It was the proto-orthodox who did so. In a later lecture, we will consider how they managed to become dominant. Before that discussion, however, we will look at some of the surviving writings from various early Christians, many of them forgeries in the names of the apostles, to which believers appealed in support of their views in the face of alternative forms of the religion prominent throughout the Christian world of the time.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, chapters 6–8.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chapter 1.

Supplementary Reading:

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.

E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence*.

A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Given the enormous range of belief we have seen in this lecture, how could all these groups plausibly consider themselves to be "Christian"?

2. Are there passages in the New Testament to which you could appeal in support of the views of Ebionites, Marcionites, and/or Gnostics?

Lecture Seventeen
The Role of Pseudepigrapha

Scope: All the various groups of early Christians understood themselves to be "right" and their Christian opponents to be "wrong." Moreover, each group had sacred texts that supported its views, books allegedly written by apostles understood to represent normative understandings of the faith. The vast majority of these books, however, were forgeries. In this lecture, we will consider several such *pseudepigraphical* accounts: a gospel of Jesus's death and Resurrection allegedly by his disciple Simon Peter; a revelatory vision allegedly recorded by Jesus's disciple John, the son of Zebeddee; and a letter allegedly written by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians ("Third" Corinthians).

Outline

I. We have seen in the preceding two lectures that Christianity was remarkably diverse in the centuries between Jesus and Constantine.

- **A.** The variety of Christian belief and practice is evident already in the earliest writings we have, those associated with the apostle Paul, many of which are directed against Christians who take alternative views of the faith.
- **B.** This diversity becomes yet more evident in the second century, when discrete theologies, such as adoptionism and docetism, emerge, as well as discrete social groups with distinctive understandings of the faith, such as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the highly variegated groups of Gnostics.
- **C.** All these groups, of course, understood themselves to be right and thought the others were wrong. What is most striking is that each group believed that it had sacred texts written by apostles that supported its own point of view. Most of these texts, however, were not actually by the apostles, but were forged.

II. The apostles played a significant role in early Christianity.

- **A.** Because Jesus left us no writings, the apostles who heard him speak, saw him perform his miracles, and witnessed his Resurrection were understood to be the direct links back to Jesus.

B. Any writings the apostles left behind were, therefore, treasured.

C. Already by the first century, Christians were forging writings in the names of the apostles, which could then be used to support their own religious perspectives. We will consider several surviving examples in this lecture.

III. We have already seen one example in the Gospel of Thomas, 114 sayings allegedly of Jesus but supporting a Gnostic point of view.

IV. One of the most intriguing early forgeries is a gospel allegedly written by Jesus's closest disciple, Peter.

A. We knew of this book for centuries, from the writings of the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, who tells us that the book was known to the church of Syria but came to be proscribed by church leaders there because it was thought to contain a docetic Christology.

B. Because of its ban, the book eventually went out of circulation.

C. It was discovered in 1887 during an archaeological dig in a cemetery in upper Egypt, which uncovered the tomb of a Christian monk who had been buried with a manuscript that contained a number of important texts, including a fragmentary copy of the Gospel of Peter.

D. This is an account of Jesus's trial, death, and Resurrection, with many similarities to the accounts of the New Testament (especially Matthew), but many key differences, as well.

1. The account is more heavily anti-Judaic than that in the New Testament Gospels. For example, it stresses the Jews' sense of guilt at what they did.
2. It is best known, however, for its vivid portrayal of the Resurrection event itself, in which Jesus emerges from the tomb tall as a skyscraper and the cross emerges from the tomb behind him.
3. There are also passages that may well have been meant to be taken docetically (for example, vv. 10, 24).

E. This book was seen, then, as a heretical gospel and its use was banned.

V. Even more obviously "unorthodox" is a gospel called the Secret Book of John, discovered, along with the Gospel of Thomas, in the Gnostic writings known as the Nag Hammadi library.

A. This is an account written from a Gnostic point of view of how the divine realm and the material world came into being, as revealed to John, the son of Zebedee, Jesus's close disciple.

B. The material world here is not said to be the good creation of the one true God. The God who created this world—who is the God of the Bible—is portrayed as an inferior, ignorant deity, far below the one true God.

C. This inferior God created this world (and made humans) as a place of imprisonment for the element of the divine that he wanted to entrap here.

D. Christ is understood as a divine emissary sent from the heavenly realm to free the divine sparks entrapped in this material world.

E. This aspersion of the Creation and of the God who made it fits well into a Gnostic perspective but is completely at odds with the views held by the Christians whose views ultimately became dominant in early Christianity.

VI. Even these proto-orthodox Christians forged documents in support of their perspectives, however, as can be seen in a pseudepigraphical letter written in Paul's name to counter such Gnostic ideas. The letter is called 3 Corinthians.

A. The letter is preserved in a longer book called the Acts of Paul, a legendary account of Paul's exploits in the missionary field.

B. According to the Acts of Paul, the Corinthian church wrote a letter to the apostle complaining that false teachers in their midst were casting aspersions on the Jewish Scriptures and saying that the Creation was not good, that Christ was not really a human, and that the flesh would not be raised.

C. "Paul" responds to these claims one by one, arguing that there is only one God, the creator of all; that Jesus, his Son, really became flesh; and that all people will be raised in the flesh.

D. This, in other words, is a proto-orthodox forgery designed to counter the forged claims of other Christian groups.

VII. In sum, all sides in the early disputes among Christians could claim apostolic support for their views. They all appear to have had authors who were willing and able to forge documents in the names of the apostles to promote their distinctive perspectives. Only one side ended up winning these disputes. That was the side that decided what Christians should profess as the truth and which books should be accepted as sacred Scripture. Is it possible that the Scriptures they decided on themselves contained forged documents? That is an issue we will address in a later lecture.

Essential Reading:

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

———, *Lost Scriptures*.

Supplementary Reading:

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*.

James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Questions to Consider:

1. The Gospels of the New Testament are written anonymously. Why do you suppose later Christians attributed them to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?
2. Try to imagine reasons for forging documents in antiquity (or today). Can you conceive of "legitimate" reasons for trying to perpetuate a literary "falsehood"?

Lecture Eighteen

The Victory of the Proto-Orthodox

Scope: This lecture examines how the conflicts were waged between "heretical" forms of Christianity and the proto-orthodox Christians who eventually established themselves as dominant. First, we consider both the classical understanding of these conflicts, as set forth in the writings of Eusebius, the "father of church history" in the second century, and the dismantling of Eusebius's views by a German scholar, Walter Bauer, in the early part of the twentieth century. We then look at how proto-orthodox writers, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, and Tertullian of Carthage, opposed other Christians and labeled them heretical, considering the standard arguments mounted by such *heresiologists* ("opponents of heresy") to show the superiority of their own views and the absurdity and depravity of their opponents'.

Outline

I. In the past three lectures, we have looked at the wide variety of early Christianity—or, rather, early Christianities—as these can be found in sources surviving in the first three Christian centuries.

- **A.** From the time of our earliest author, Paul, onward, there were widely discrepant understandings of God, Jesus, the world, and salvation among people claiming to be Jesus's true followers.
- **B.** All the Christian groups that promoted one form of the faith over another claimed to be right and asserted that the others were wrong.
- **C.** Moreover, each group had its own separate books—the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Secret Book of John, 3 Corinthians, and a host of others—allegedly written by apostles of Jesus and supporting their views over those of others.
- **D.** How is it that most of these groups disappeared from sight and only one of them endured—that only one emerged as victorious in the internecine disputes for dominance in early Christianity,

determining what Christians would believe and which sacred books they would read?

E. That is what we will consider in this lecture, the victory of the proto-orthodox form of Christianity.

II. The traditional view of the relationship of *orthodoxy* and *heresy* can be found in the writings of Eusebius.

A. For Eusebius, the terms of the debate correspond closely to their etymologies: *orthodoxy* is "right belief" and *heresy* represents a willful "choice" to adopt a different belief.

B. The relationship of right and false belief for Eusebius can be seen in his description of the fate of the "father of all heretics," Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8), who created a perversion of the apostolic preaching about Jesus and acquired some pestiferous followers but was eventually defeated by the true power of the Gospel manifest by the apostle Peter.

C. This represents the "classical" view of orthodoxy and heresy.

1. Orthodoxy was the original teaching of Jesus as delivered to his disciples, who handed it down to the leaders of the churches that they established. Moreover, it has been the majority view of all the important Christian churches from the beginning.

2. Heresy is a corruption of this truth by willful individuals inspired by evil demons. By definition, therefore, heresy is derivative, late, and corrupt. Moreover, it is always the minority view, a faulty offshoot of the truth.

3. Orthodoxy emerges as victorious, then, because it is original, apostolic, true, and superior.

III. The Eusebian understanding of orthodoxy and heresy remained the dominant understanding for some 1,600 years, until the writings of a modern German scholar, Walter Bauer, who completely overturned it based on a careful examination of our earliest surviving sources.

A. Bauer explored the surviving sources for major regions of early Christendom of which we have some firsthand knowledge (Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Rome).

1. In most of the places for which we have evidence, the *earliest* evidence is of forms of Christianity that were later deemed heretical.

2. It appears that in most places, therefore, heretical forms of Christianity were in evidence before orthodox forms and were the majority view in the earliest stages.
3. Moreover, in many places, there were no hard lines to be drawn between heretical and orthodox views (even in the writings of some of the proto-orthodox fathers later considered forebears of orthodoxy, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen).

B. Bauer concluded that early Christianity was not composed of a solid and virtually universal majority opinion (orthodoxy) that was occasionally but marginally corrupted by willful heretics.
1. Instead, in the earliest periods, Christianity comprised a wide conglomerate of groups attesting a variety of views.
2. These groups battled for converts, and only one group won out.
3. This was the group that had strongest support in the city of Rome. It was Roman Christianity that began to assert itself over other forms of Christianity in other areas. Eventually, it was Roman Christianity that won out.
4. The Roman church emerged, then, as central, universal in Christianity. Eventually, of course, this became the Roman Catholic church.

C. Bauer maintained that this victory was not predetermined; it was, instead, the result of social and political forces, especially the wealth and administrative "know-how" of Christians in the Roman church.

IV. Scholars today tend to accept major aspects of Bauer's reconstruction, while disputing most of his detailed claims: Earliest Christianity was highly variegated; numerous groups were vying for dominance; and only one of the groups emerged as victorious. Several factors led to this victory.

A. The writings of the proto-orthodox *heresiologists* ("heresy-hunters"), such as Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian, proved remarkably successful.
1. These authors mounted compelling philosophical arguments against their opponents, arguing, for example, against Marcion and the Gnostics that for the divine being to be all-powerful,

he had to be one (because if there was more than one, neither could be "all" powerful).

2. They ridiculed their opponents' views, especially those of the Gnostics, as being fabulous and ridiculous.
3. They maligned their opponents as being morally reprobate.
4. They appealed to apostolic authority in support of their perspectives, both apostolic books and apostolic "leaders" (that is, church leaders who, they claimed, had been appointed by apostles).

B. But the scholars of the other groups could mount comparable arguments for their own positions and against those of the proto-orthodox (even though these scholars' writings were later destroyed, and we no longer have access to them).

C. In some ways, the proto-orthodox ended up victorious because they were well organized and concentrated in their efforts to employ other strategies.

1. They insisted on a set canon of scriptural authorities, a group of apostolic books that could convey the truths necessary for salvation.
2. They constructed set creeds that were to be professed by everyone in their churches.
3. They advocated a group of leaders with apostolic credentials, in that they had been appointed by apostles and their successors, and thus, represented the apostolic perspectives.

V. The history of the internal conflicts of early Christianity was not a neat and tidy affair, as Eusebius would have had us think. There were enormous disputes that lasted for many decades, centuries even. Eventually, these were resolved only when one group managed to win a majority of converts, then rewrote the history of the conflict to make it appear that its view had always been right and in the majority—that it had always been "orthodox."

Essential Reading:

Walter Bauer, *Orthodox and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*.

———, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, chapter 1.

Supplementary Reading:

Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories*.

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*.

Robert M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels*.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Based on what we have learned in the lectures so far, detail any of the problems you can see in a Eusebian understanding of orthodoxy and heresy.

2. Does it make sense to use the words *orthodoxy* ("right belief") and *heresy* ("choice" of a wrong belief) as historical terms? Or are they too loaded with theological implications of who was right and who was wrong to be of use to historians of the conflict?

Lecture Nineteen
The New Testament Canon

Scope: This is the first of five lectures devoted to the question of how traditional Christianity—with its canon of Scripture, creeds, liturgy, and church offices—emerged out of the conflicts of the second and third centuries. In this lecture, we will consider the formation of the canon of Scripture. Given the circumstance that numerous books were written in the names of the apostles in the early Christian centuries, how is it that 27 (and only these 27) came to be considered sacred Scripture? Who decided which books should be included in the canon? What criteria did they use? What motivated the decisions? When did the process come to a close?

As we will see, the New Testament did not come into being right after the death of Jesus or even decades later. Even by the end of the fourth Christian century, heated debates continued over which books should be included in the canon.

Outline

I. For the past several lectures, we have been exploring the diversity of early Christianity, with different groups advocating different understandings of the faith, only one of which emerged as victorious. This lecture is the first of five on the form of Christianity that emerged from these conflicts.

- **A.** I call this *traditional* Christianity, because it is the form of Christianity that began to thrive at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth centuries, when Constantine converted to the faith.
- **B.** Even though Christianity remained diverse down through the Middle Ages and on into the modern period, there were certain aspects of the religion that were fairly constant throughout much of the church, such as a set canon of Scripture, a set creed to be recited, a set understanding of the church hierarchical structure.
- **C.** We begin, in this lecture, by looking at a fundamental component of traditional Christianity, the canon of Scripture.

II. Although it may seem commonsensical to us today that a major religion should have a set of authoritative writings understood to be Scripture, this was somewhat anomalous in the Roman world.

- **A.** The idea of having a collection of sacred books that indicated what one should believe about the divine and how one should live was virtually unheard of in pagan circles, that is, among the vast majority of ancient people.
- **B.** Judaism was the one exception, in that the Hebrew Scriptures were accepted by Jews throughout the world as providing sacred tales and laws to govern the lives of God's people.

III. Christianity eventually acquired a set of sacred books—a canon of Scripture—because it emerged out of Judaism, which also had a set of sacred books.

- **A.** There was no set canon of Scripture for Jews in the days of Jesus, but Jesus, like most Jews throughout the Roman world, accepted the Torah as coming from God and taught it to his followers.
- **B.** The Jewish Scriptures—the Torah, the prophets, some other writings—became a set of sacred authorities for Christians from the very beginning.
- **C.** Soon, however, Christians started appealing to other, explicitly Christian writings, as being on an equal footing with Scripture. This is the beginning of the formation of a distinctively Christian canon.
  - **1.** Already during the first century, in our earliest author, Paul, Jesus's own words are granted sacred authority (1 Cor. 7; 1 Cor. 9).
  - **2.** By the end of the first century, Jesus's word is considered "Scripture" (1 Tim. 5:18).
  - **3.** Strikingly, so too, are the writings of his apostles (2 Pet. 3:16).

IV. But which apostolic books were to be accepted as Scripture? That was one of the big debates among early Christian churches.

- **A.** It appears that Marcion was the first to give a definitive canon of Scripture to his followers: the Gospel of Luke and 10 of Paul's writings.
- **B.** Other Christians, though, accepted different books, including other Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Thomas, Peter, and so on).

C. It may well be that Marcion gave the impetus for proto-orthodox leaders to devise their own canon of Scripture.

D. During Marcion's own day, the proto-orthodox Justin shows no concern for having a fixed set of authorities.

E. Some 30 years later, however, Irenaeus—who stands in the same theological tradition as Justin—insists vehemently that there must be four Gospels (not just one) and that they are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Anyone who chooses just one or the other provides a skewed understanding of the faith.

V. What can we say then about the motivations for establishing a set canon of Scripture among the proto-orthodox?

A. There appear to have been a variety of factors at work, including the need for Christians to distinguish themselves from Jews and the desire to have written (apostolic) authorities to support their points of view.

B. Most significant, however, was the need to decide which of these points of view were right and to have apostolic support for them.

VI. Given the need to have a set collection of sacred texts, how did the proto-orthodox decide on which texts to include? A survey of the early discussions of the canon reveal four major criteria that were applied.

A. A book had to be ancient to be accepted into the canon of Scripture. Any recent production—as valuable as it may be for reading and instruction—could not be considered scriptural.

B. A book had to be connected with an apostle to be considered canonical.

C. A book needed to be widely accepted among the proto-orthodox churches to be seen as canonical.

D. Perhaps most important of all, a book had to evidence a proto-orthodox theology to be acceptable as Scripture. Recall the Gospel of Peter: Because it allegedly contained a docetic Christology, it could not have been apostolic and, therefore, could not be scriptural.

VII. The debates over canon were long and hard.

A. Even though Marcion began the process in the mid-second century, it took centuries for the dispute to be resolved.

B. It does appear that most proto-orthodox Christians accepted a core of texts that eventually became canonical: the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John, for example.

C. But other texts were long debated: The Book of Hebrews, the Apocalypse of John, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas—all were considered by one group or another to be canonical into the third and fourth centuries.

D. It was not until 367 C.E. that anyone listed the 27 books of our New Testament as being the canon (these books and no others).

1. This was by the famous bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, in a pastoral letter he sent to his churches in Egypt.
2. Even after that, however, the matter continued to be disputed for some time.
3. Eventually, though, there was wide agreement. Today, throughout the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches, there is a consensus on what constitutes the canon of New Testament Scripture.

VIII. The debates over which books to consider Scripture were long and drawn out. Eventually, a canon emerged that is accepted by the majority of Christians today. This canon provides the basis of all faith and practice and, to that extent, represents an important and long-reaching aspect of the victory of the proto-orthodox: With the success of this collection of authoritative books, other forms of Christianity were necessarily marginalized and effectively destroyed, while orthodox Christianity could then move on to debates over other issues down into the Middle Ages.

Essential Reading:

Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 9.

———, *Lost Christianities*.

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*.

Supplementary Reading:

F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*.

Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Pick one of the non-canonical books we have considered in this course. How might Christianity be different if it had been included among the sacred Scriptures?
2. Why do you imagine it took so long for proto-orthodox Christians to establish a fixed canon of Scripture?

Lecture Twenty

The Development of Church Offices

Scope: The earliest Christian churches that we know about—those founded by the apostle Paul—were *charismatic* communities, in which there was no single person in charge, but the entire community ministered to one another through the "gifts" (Greek: *charismata*) believed to have been given by the Spirit of God. By the end of the fourth century, however, things were different: Each local church had its leader; every large community had a presiding bishop; and the bishops of major urban areas (such as Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome) were accorded special honor and authority. This lecture considers the movement from one form of church organization to the other, to see how the official church hierarchy developed, with its elders, deacons, priests, and bishops. In particular, we will trace the early stages of this development from Paul to the author of 1 Clement and Ignatius of Antioch and on to the clear church structures set out in the writings of Hippolytus of Rome.

Outline

I. We began our investigation into the formation of traditional Christianity in the previous lecture by considering the rise and development of the canon of Scripture.

A. There, we saw that the establishment of a 27-book canon was largely the result of the internal needs of the church.

B. These included the need for self-identity distinct from Judaism and the need to establish ancient and apostolic authorities for "right belief."

II. One other important feature of traditional Christianity was the establishment of a clerical hierarchy to oversee the life, beliefs, liturgy, practices, and ethics of the Christian community.

A. Christianity in its early years had nothing like a clerical hierarchy. Our oldest evidence of the organization of the Christian churches comes in our earliest Christian author, Paul.

B. Paul's churches were not *clerical* (run by "clergy") but *charismatic* (run by "gifts of the Spirit").

C. As an apocalypticist, Paul, like most other early Christians, believed that he was living at the very end of the age.

1. This was the short interim period between the beginning of the end of all things—which started with Jesus's Crucifixion, God's decisive act of redemption for the world—and the climax of all things—to come with the return of Jesus from heaven to bring in a utopian kingdom on Earth.
2. Given that the end was near, there was no driving need to establish permanent social structures for the churches that had been established.
3. God had, therefore, made a temporary provision for governance in this brief interim. Each person who came into the church was endowed with the Spirit of God, which provided the person with a "gift" (Greek: *charisma*) that could be used to promote the good of the community in its life together.
4. These gifts included such things as the power to know God's will (*knowledge*); the ability to speak prophecy directly from God (*prophecy*), sometimes in strange, unknown languages (*tongues*) that could be interpreted by others (*interpretation of tongues*); and the abilities to heal the sick (*healing*), to tend to the needs of the poor (*giving*), and to teach God's truth to members of the congregation (*teaching*).

D. The nature and difficulty of the charismatic organization of Paul's churches can be seen in his First Letter to the Corinthians, which shows that the gifts were being abused and that, without any one person in charge, chaos was erupting.

III. Eventually, this charismatic structure gave way to a more top-down form of organization, with church leaders with established qualifications who were appointed and given charge over church affairs.

A. A start can be seen already in the New Testament writings, including those associated with Paul, especially the pastoral Epistles.

B. Soon after these writings, the importance of church leaders becomes clear. Especially in a book known as 1 Clement (c. 95 C.E.).

1. The book of 1 Clement was written by the Christians of Rome to the Christians of Corinth, and it shows that here, some 30 years after Paul's letters to Corinth, the church was being run by a group of "elders" (*presbyters*).

2. The letter addresses a situation that has occurred in the church: The elders had been deposed and another group had taken over the church.

3. The letter of 1 Clement works to redress the issue, urging the church to restore the original leaders. One of the arguments it uses is that these original leaders had been appointed by the successors of the apostles and can trace their authority back through their predecessors to the apostles to Christ, who came from God. Anyone who opposes them, therefore, is opposed to God.

4. This is the earliest instance of the idea of an apostolic succession guaranteeing the validity of the leadership of the church, a useful doctrine in the hands of the proto-orthodox of later times.

C. An even clearer instance of the formation of church offices comes in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 C.E.).

1. Few themes in his surviving letters are more prominent than his insistence that each church has one solitary leader, a *bishop* (literally, "overseer") who has presbyters and deacons serving under him.

2. For Ignatius, the church must be completely obedient to the bishop as to God and submissive to the demands of the presbyters.

IV. This movement away from a kind of democratic/charismatic form of church structure to an appointed clerical hierarchy can be seen in later works of the second and third centuries, such as the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome.

A. Hippolytus was an important figure in early Christianity—a heresiologist who became convinced that the upper echelons of the leadership of the church of Rome had become heretical; he had himself set up as history's first "anti-pope."

B. Among his writings is the *Apostolic Tradition*, which advances a clear form of church structure.
   1. The means of ordaining church officials are set forth, including major offices, such as bishop, presbyter, and deacon, as well as lower-level offices, such as church widows, readers, virgins, and subdeacons.
   2. Moreover, instructions concerning some of the official duties of these positions are discussed.

V. With the passing of time, the organization of these local churches came to take on more than just local significance.

A. The leaders of the larger churches had jurisdiction over smaller churches in the vicinity (cf. Serapion of the Gospel of Peter).

B. Eventually, the bishops of the largest churches had jurisdiction over even major churches.

C. The bishop of Rome was the bishop of the largest church in Christendom and, by the beginning of the fourth century, was widely seen as the head of the church at large.

D. When Christianity was made the official religion of the state in the late fourth century by Theodosius I, he ruled that Christianity as interpreted by the bishop of Rome—the eventual pope—was to be the religion of the empire.

VI. Even though Christian churches started out as charismatic communities, it was not long before church structures had local leaders, who soon became leaders of Christians in entire regions. These leaders had to have certain qualifications and were to be ordained in established ways with certain set duties. Eventually, these bishops became extremely powerful, especially the bishop of Rome, who was, ultimately, the bishop over the entire church. This is the church that survived, then, down into the Middle Ages.

Essential Reading:

Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 10.

Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*.

Supplementary Reading:

James Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*.

Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In your judgment, was the failure of a charismatic church structure inevitable?
2. What kind of abuses could occur with the development of a more rigidly structured church hierarchy, with power invested in the hands of a few of the elite who had jurisdiction over the faith and practice of others?

Lecture Twenty-One
The Rise of Christian Liturgy

Scope: This lecture considers how Christian liturgical practices arose, in particular those that became virtually universal throughout the church: baptism and the Eucharist. We will consider the roots of these practices in the ministry of Jesus (and, before him, John the Baptist), and see how they developed in the churches of Paul, as seen, for example, in his letters to the Corinthians and the Romans. We will then move into the second century to see how these practices were defended against outsiders who suspected that they involved acts of immorality (Christians were charged with holding "secret" meetings that included eating flesh and drinking blood!). Finally, we will examine an early attempt to standardize the practices in the writings of an important leader of the church of Rome, Hippolytus.

Outline

I. To this point in our exploration of traditional Christianity, we have considered the formation of the canon of Scripture and the development of church offices. In this lecture, we will look at an equally important aspect of Christian communal life: the development of the worship services, especially the liturgical practices of baptism and Eucharist.

II. Because being "Christian" meant, in some sense, being in a special relation with God, from the beginning, Christians understood themselves to be part of a worshipping community.

- **A.** Much early Christian worship was taken over from Jewish synagogue worship.
  - **1.** Unlike pagan practices of worship, Christians had no sacred statues, temples, or rituals of sacrifice.
  - **2.** Like Jews of the second and third centuries, Christians in their services of worship stressed the reading and exposition of Scripture, prayer, confession, exhortation, the singing of psalms and hymns, and the collection of alms.

3. Eventually, Christian practices shared with Jews, such as fasting, came to be differentiated from them.

B. Like many other religions, Christianity developed certain "boundary markers" to indicate what it meant to join the group and, once in, to belong to it.

III. Two of the principal boundary markers from the earliest of times were liturgical, involving the Christian services of worship. These were the practices of baptism and Eucharist.

A. Both practices came to be seen as rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus: his own baptism and last supper and his commands that his disciples practice these rites.

B. Both have parallels in Jewish liturgical traditions (special ritualistic washings and periodic celebratory and commemorative meals).

C. Yet both took on distinctive meaning in the earliest Christian traditions, as evidenced in our earliest source of information for both practices, the apostle Paul.

1. In Paul's day, baptism was a one-time ritual for adult converts in which they experienced a unification with the dead and risen Christ and a deliverance from the cosmic forces of evil in the world (Rom. 6).
2. The Eucharist was a common meal that commemorated Jesus's death and Resurrection in anticipation of his return in judgment.
3. Both practices, therefore, were understood in light of Paul's own apocalyptic views that in Christ, God had begun to overthrow the forces of evil in the world, to be climaxed soon in a cataclysmic act of judgment.
4. Eventually, these practices took on even more mystical overtones, as evidenced in Ignatius of Antioch's claim that the Eucharist provided the antidote that wards off death (Ign. Eph. 20:2)—a non-apocalyptic image.

D. Over time, these two rituals came to develop set "forms" and requirements, as seen in the early Christian document known as the *Didache*.

1. Discovered only in 1873 in Constantinople, the *Didache* is an important Christian document that, among other things, discusses the ritual practices of the early church (c. 100 C.E.).
2. In it are explicit directions concerning how to baptize (in cold, running water; in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and how to have the Eucharistic meal (with prayers, first over the cup, then the bread).

IV. Baptism and Eucharist were secret rituals, and rumors about what they involved led to some of the charges we have seen against Christians.

A. Baptism was in the nude and involved a liturgical kiss of welcome. Eucharist entailed eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of God. Naturally, as word leaked out, Christians were slandered for such "heinous" activities.

B. To defend Christians against such charges, some of the apologists, such as Justin and Tertullian, went to great lengths to show that the rituals were both innocent and wholesome.

1. These are some of our most extensive early explanations about what actually happened during these services.
2. Justin's First Apology, in particular, shows how the practices were followed in Rome in the middle of the second century.

V. Eventually, the practices became more complex and detailed, as can be seen in their description in Hippolytus's work, the *Apostolic Tradition*.

A. Here, we have a lengthy account of what one must do in preparation for baptism; candidates for baptism undergo a three-year period of learning (a *catechesis*).

B. There are then complex preparatory rituals of fastings and exorcisms before the baptism (chs. 17–20).

C. Hippolytus goes on to describe in great detail the actual baptism itself (ch. 21).

D. After being baptized, the Christian could for the first time partake of the communion meal (the Eucharist), which Hippolytus also describes in detail (ch. 23).

VI. The Christian services of worship continued to involve not just these two rituals, but weekly meetings of prayer, exhortation, Scripture reading, and exposition.

A. Several "homilies" exist from the early church (2 Clement, the Easter homily of Melito).

B. These are expositional treatments that take elements of the scriptural text to instruct, admonish, and edify their Christian listeners.

VII. Christian liturgy developed over time, in ways that paralleled the establishment of the church hierarchy. It became less apocalyptic in its orientation (that is, less concerned with the imminent end of all things) and more highly structured (with long periods of instruction before baptism, for example). Rituals and forms of worship developed that were designed to prepare Christians for their life in community together as a body separate from those around them, emphasizing their distinctiveness from their world and their unique standing before God.

Essential Reading:

Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 11.

Supplementary Reading:

Everett Ferguson, *Worship in Early Christianity*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what ways does Paul's understanding of baptism differ from those you are familiar with today?
2. Why do you imagine liturgical practices became so much more complex and structured in Christianity with the passing of time?

Lecture Twenty-Two
The Beginnings of Normative Theology

Scope: We have already seen a wide range of beliefs in evidence among the earliest Christians. In this lecture, we will consider the development of a normative theology among the proto-orthodox, who insisted that believing the "right" things was essential for salvation and who took care, therefore, to formulate correct doctrine and differentiate it from false doctrine. One of the interesting features of orthodox theology is its paradoxical affirmations (Jesus is human and divine at the same time; God is in three persons, but there is only one God). We will see that these paradoxes emerged as proto-orthodox writers developed their views in opposition to the views of others (who denied, for example, either Jesus's humanity or his divinity). This lecture shows how such doctrines developed from the time of Paul, to Ignatius of Antioch, and on into the early fourth century, when they came to be embodied in the early Christian creeds.

Outline

I. In the past three lectures, we explored some of the important aspects of the development of traditional Christianity: the formation of the New Testament canon of Scripture, the establishment of church offices and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the development of Christian liturgy. In every instance, we have seen that the Christianity that had emerged by the fourth century was quite different from the forms of Christianity of the first and second centuries.

II. No aspect of traditional Christianity is more important than the development of a normative set of theological beliefs. Here, too, we can trace a significant change over time, from the early attempts at theological reflection to the more sophisticated and refined doctrinal views advanced by the fourth century.

III. From the very beginning, Christianity was unique in the Roman world for its emphasis on doctrine as an important aspect of religion.

A. Pagan religions were not doctrinal in nature.
   1. Despite their wide-ranging diversity, all pagan/polytheistic religion focused on cultic acts, not on beliefs about the gods.
   2. As a result, there was no such thing as heresy and orthodoxy in Roman paganism.

B. Not even Judaism stressed belief per se, although belief in the one true God was certainly presupposed in the Jewish religion. But the religion itself was about worship, life, and practice, not belief.

C. From its beginning, however, Christianity stressed the importance of correct belief.
   1. This is due, in part, to the nature of its claims about Jesus: that he was, in fact, the Jewish Messiah who was crucified for the sins of the world.
   2. This is not at all what any Jews anticipated the messiah would be; thus, a major part of the early Christian mission involved convincing Jews that the Scriptures predicted a messiah who would suffer and die. This view was widely rejected among Jews.
   3. But for most Christians, believing in Jesus's death and Resurrection is what made a person right with God.
   4. Therefore, knowing the correct things about Jesus (for example, that he was the Son of God and the Messiah who was crucified for the sins of the world) and having proper faith (for example, belief in his death and Resurrection for salvation) were determinative, early on, of what it meant to be a Christian.
   5. Being a Christian did not mean performing certain sacrifices to a certain god in a certain way. It meant having correct knowledge and proper beliefs about God and his involvement in the world.

D. This doctrinal emphasis can be seen in our earliest Christian author, Paul, for example, in his summary of his preaching of Christ's death and Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3–5) or in his vehement opposition to Christians who took an opposing theological perspective (such as in Galatians).

IV. Because proper belief mattered in early Christianity, a number of the major internal disputes involved correct versus incorrect doctrine over

such issues as monotheism (is there only one God?), the nature of Christ (is he human? divine? both?), the character of the material world (is it the creation of the true God? a cosmic mistake?), the way of salvation (does it come through Christ's death? his teachings? his moral example?), and so on.

A. We have already seen that different Christian groups took opposite sides of these debates (cf. the Marcionites and the Ebionites).

B. It was the middle ground of proto-orthodoxy that ended up winning the disputes, but in doing so, it was forced by its opposition to contrasting views to develop a highly paradoxical set of theological affirmations.

   1. Against adoptionists, the proto-orthodox stressed that Jesus was divine; against docetists, they stressed that he was human; against Gnostics, they stressed that he was one being, not two. The paradoxical assertion emerged that he was fully human and fully divine, yet only one person.

   2. So, too, against the Ebionites, the proto-orthodox stressed that Jesus was God, while against the Marcionites and Gnostics, they stressed that there was only one God. But how could Jesus be God and God be God if there is only one God? That was part of the proto-orthodox paradoxical claim.

   3. The resulting paradoxes can be seen at an early stage in the theological claims of Ignatius concerning Jesus (Ign. Eph.7:2).

V. Eventually, proto-Christian authors developed certain set doctrines that were to be subscribed to by all "true" believers.

A. This set of doctrines was often called the "rule of faith" (Latin: *regula fidei*).

B. It is outlined in broadly similar ways by such early proto-orthodox theologians as Irenaeus and Tertullian.

C. Its basic tenets involved belief in one God, the creator of all, and Jesus, his Son, who was both human and divine; belief in Jesus's miraculous life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension; and belief in the Holy Spirit, who is present on Earth until the end, when there would be a final judgment in which the righteous would be rewarded and the unrighteous condemned to eternal torment (thus, for example, Tertullian, *Prescription of Heretics*).

VI. In some ways connected to the *regula fidei* were the early creedal statements that developed.

A. Originally, these were probably part of the ceremony of Christian baptism, performed in the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The creeds tended to be tripartite.

B. Over time, the statements of the creeds were refined in light of various "false" beliefs that developed; for example, the belief of many Christians in the early fourth century that even though Jesus was divine, he was a subordinate divinity to God the Father.

C. The orthodox view emerged that Jesus was, in fact, of the same nature as God, though distinct from him in person.

D. Two of the creeds devised originally in the fourth century have come down to us today and are still recited in many services of worship throughout the world: the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds. These creeds embody many of the paradoxical affirmations that emerged in the conflicts of the second through the fourth centuries.

VII. Christianity was unique in the ancient world for its emphasis on proper belief rather than cultic action. This stress on belief led to a heightened role of doctrine and a correct understanding of the tenets of the religion. These came to be refined over time, especially in opposition to perspectives believed to be aberrant, leading to highly paradoxical affirmations of faith. Nowhere is this development more interesting or historically significant than in the doctrine of the Trinity, which we will examine at greater length in the next lecture.

Essential Reading:

Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 14.

———, *Lost Christianities*, chapter 8.

Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1.

Supplementary Reading:

Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1.

Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy*.

William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does it seem strange to you, or natural, that a religion would place an eternal significance on correct propositional statements about the deity and his role in our world?
2. Do you see the paradoxical affirmations of Christianity to be a strength (for example, in acknowledging the "mystery" of God) or a weakness (for example, in simply accommodating various perspectives)? Discuss one of the Christian doctrinal paradoxes, for example, that God is the creator of all there is but not of evil that exists.

Lecture Twenty-Three
The Doctrine of the Trinity

Scope: This lecture considers the most distinctive theological development of early Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity—that God exists in three persons, who are all equal and distinct, but who nonetheless make up only one God. We will consider the roots of this view in the books of the New Testament (where the doctrine of the Trinity is never explicitly stated) and in proto-orthodox authors of the second century, who insist that Jesus is divine and that he is distinct from God the Father, but that there is nonetheless only one God. We will also consider some of the early proto-orthodox attempts to explain the mystery of the Trinity, attempts that later came to be branded as heretical (for example, that Jesus is God the Father himself come in the flesh), and see how opposition to these views by such writers as Hippolytus and Tertullian led to the classical formulation of one God in three persons.

Outline

I. In the previous lecture, we saw how Christian doctrine became a central component of the religion in its early years and came to be refined with the passing of time into a complex and highly paradoxical set of affirmations, embodied eventually in the Christian creeds.

II. No Christian doctrine is more distinctive or historically significant than the doctrine of the Trinity. Like other doctrines that became central to the faith, however, belief in the Trinity was a historical development, not a "given" from the early years of the faith.

A. The basic notion of the Trinity is that there are three persons in the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are all equally God and of the same substance, but despite the fact that there are three persons, together, they comprise only one God, indivisible in nature.

B. This doctrine does not appear to be a doctrine pronounced by the historical Jesus, Paul, or any other Christian writer during the first hundred years or so of Christianity.

C. It cannot be found explicitly stated in the earliest Christian writings. The only passage of the New Testament that declares the doctrine (1 John 5:7–8) was not originally part of the text but was added by doctrinally astute scribes at a later date (it is not found in any Greek manuscript until the 11th century).

III. The easiest way to explain the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity is to consider developments in the understanding of Christ in the early years of Christianity.

A. Even though there were Christians who continued to insist that Jesus was human but not divine from the beginning, there were Christians who claimed that he was, in some sense, divine.

1. This can be seen at the very earliest stage, in the writings of Paul, especially in one passage that he appears to be *quoting* from an earlier author, Phil. 2:6–11. This belief, then, was around even before our earliest Christian writings.
2. Other books of the New Testament (for example, Matthew and Mark) consider Jesus to be the "Son" of God but do not appear to assert that this means he was himself divine. He was God's Son in the way the kings of Israel were God's sons—his representatives on Earth (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14).
3. But some books near the end of the New Testament period become yet more explicit that Jesus was actually himself divine, for example, the Gospel of John (cf. 1:1–3; 8:58; 10:30; 20:31).
4. Eventually, it became common to refer to Christ as God (e.g., Ignatius Eph. 1:1; 7:2).
5. These early writers, however, never worked out the implications of how Jesus could be God if God was God (cf. the loose statement of Ignatius Eph. 18:2).

B. It was also thought that the Spirit of God was, in some sense, distinct from God and from Jesus (cf. John 14).

IV. Various "solutions" to the problem of how Jesus and God could both be divine were suggested by different authors.

A. Within proto-orthodox circles, the solution had to affirm monotheism, yet accept the deity of Christ.

B. One influential solution was put forth by one of the greatest Christian thinkers and scholars of the first three centuries of Christianity, Origen of Alexandria.

1. Origen was a genius who was raised Christian in Alexandria and, as a teenager, was appointed to be head of the famed Alexandrian school for Christian catechesis.
2. He was an inordinately prodigious author, with over 1,000 books to his credit.
3. And he was a deep thinker, who tried to work out for the first time in a systematic way the mysteries of the Christian faith based on the revelation found in the Scriptures.
4. He developed a complex Christological view that affirmed that Christ was both fully divine, yet one of God's creations. He began, in fact, like all humans, as a pre-existent soul who was created to contemplate God for eternity.
5. Other souls failed to do so, however. Only this one soul remained completely focused on God in eternity past, so much so that it became "one" with God, just as iron placed in a fire takes on all the characteristics of the fire.
6. This is the soul that became incarnate in Christ when God sent him into the world for salvation. Christ is, thus, equal with God and of the same substance, yet distinct and, ultimately, subordinate.
7. This solution was both creative and influential. But it was eventually condemned by theologians, because it subordinated Christ to the Father.

C. Even more influential, if less astute, was the view adopted widely by the end of the second century—even by the bishops of Rome.

1. The view goes under a number of labels: Sabellianism (named after one of its adherents); monarchialism (named for its thesis: that there is only one monarch); or, a mocking term invented by one of its chief opponents, Patripassianism (a view that "makes the Father suffer").
2. This is the view that Jesus really was God—God the Father come to Earth.
3. The view allowed there to be only one God and affirmed that Jesus was God.
4. The view was attacked, though, by numerous proto-orthodox authors, especially Hippolytus and Tertullian, because it did

not allow for the separate existence of God and Christ (see especially Tertullian's *Against Praxeas*, directed against a proponent of the view).

V. The opposition to Patripassianist Christology led Tertullian and others like him to develop language that later came to form the core of Trinitarian thinking.

A. As Hippolytus puts it, "with respect to the power, God is one; but with respect to the economy [that is, to how this power expresses itself], the manifestation is triple" (*Refutation*, 8:2).

B. In Tertullians's formulation, God is three in degree, not condition; in form, not substance; in aspect, not power (*Against Praxeas*, 2).

C. This Trinitarian way of thinking itself became a matter of deep reflection, as theologians began to be obsessed with the question of how and in what way Christ could be both human and divine, completely both.

1. Did he have a human soul but a divine spirit? Did he have a divine soul instead of a human soul? Was his body really like everyone else's body? How could God have a body? Was he subordinate to the Father, as in Origen? If he was not subordinate to the Father, why was *he* the one sent, rather than the other way around?

2. Eventually, however, the terms were worked out and written into the creeds that have come down to us today, especially the Nicene Creed, as we examined in the previous lecture.

VI. In sum, the doctrine of the Trinity developed over several centuries of theological controversy; it arose with the view that Jesus himself must be divine, while there must be one and only one God. The Spirit, too, was recognized as divine, which more or less compelled orthodox thinkers to maintain that even though there is only one God, he is manifest in three different persons who are of the same nature but are distinct in number and function, the three in one.

Essential Reading:

Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapter 14.

———, *Lost Christianities*, chapter 8.

William Rusch, *Trinitarian Controversies*.

Supplementary Reading:

Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1.

Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you imagine Christianity would have been different if the doctrine of the Trinity had never developed?
2. Do doctrines such as the Trinity have any practical relevance to the way people live (or have lived, over the centuries)?

Lecture Twenty-Four

Christianity and the Conquest of Empire

Scope: This concluding lecture brings together the various strands we have explored throughout the course and considers the character of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century. We will return here to the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine and discuss the significance of this conversion for the fortunes of later Christianity. As we know, it moved from being a persecuted minority to having "most favored status" among the religions of the empire, leading to massive conversions and, eventually, to Christianity's status as the official religion of the state. These developments had enormous consequences for the history of Western civilization, as the Christian church was then positioned to become the dominant religious, political, social, cultural, and economic institution of Europe and the New World.

Outline

I. Throughout these lectures, we have traced significant developments in Christianity from the days of Jesus in the first century A.D. to the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth. As we come now to the conclusion of our course, I would like to take stock of where we are.

- **A.** By the early fourth century, Christianity had almost completely separated off from Judaism, the religion of Jesus and his apostles.
  1. Although it started as a sect within Judaism, it was widely rejected among Jews and soon became a separate religion that went on the counterattack against its Jewish opponents.
  2. By the second century, Christians had already begun to adopt harshly anti-Judaic rhetoric, accusing Jews of misinterpreting their own Scriptures, rejecting their own Messiah, spurning their own God; Jews were considered Christ-killers and a people fallen from grace.
  3. This anti-Judaic polemic was heightened by the need felt by Christians to embrace the Jewish Scriptures as their own to establish the credibility of their religion as ancient in a world that valued antiquity. To claim the Scriptures, however, meant taking them from the Jews.

B. By the early fourth century, non-Jewish Christianity had become a major world religion.

1. Already by the middle of the first century, missionaries, such as Paul, had spread the religion to major urban areas of the Mediterranean.
2. Growth was steady over the years, affected through conversions of family members, friends, and neighbors of converts. It appears to have grown at about the rate of 40 percent every decade.
3. Its missionary effectiveness was facilitated by its exclusivistic claims: Those who joined this religion had to reject their previous one (this was not the case for other religions in the empire, except for Judaism, which was not, by and large, a missionary religion). This means that Christianity destroyed other religions while advancing its own.
4. By the early fourth century, possibly five to seven percent of the population of the empire was Christian.

C. By the early fourth century, Christianity had a long history of local and official opposition, persecution, and martyrdom.

1. In the vast majority of cases, the persecutions were sporadic and local, instigated by mobs offended by the Christian refusal to worship the gods and by reports of flagrant immorality.
2. There were several instances, however, in which emperors had become involved in persecution (Nero, Marcus Aurelius, Decius).

D. By the early fourth century, Christianity had undergone significant theological development.

1. There had been numerous theological controversies over God, Christ, the material world, salvation, and many other issues.
2. Most of the major "heresies" of earlier days, however, had been effectively suppressed by the fourth century (Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics).
3. Christianity had, by this time, developed a core of sacred Scriptures (even if the canon was not fixed in final form), a church hierarchy, set liturgical practices, and important creedal statements, including a widespread belief that Jesus was somehow both God and man and the concomitant acceptance of some notion of the Trinity, the details of which

would be worked out by theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries.

II. Despite all this impressive progress, a good case can be made that it was the conversion of Constantine himself that proved to be the single most important event of Christianity's first 300 years, a climactic moment on the one hand and the beginning of something entirely new on the other.

A. Constantine's conversion was one of the most significant events in all of Western civilization.

1. Had it not happened, the vast majority of Christians throughout history (there are some two billion today, the largest world religion) would have remained pagan.
2. As a result, the history of Western civilization that we know through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and into modern times would never have occurred.
3. If Constantine had not converted, neither would have the Roman Empire. And that would have changed everything.

B. No 10-year period was more important for the fortunes of Christianity than 303–313 C.E.

1. In 303 C.E., the pagan emperor of the eastern part of the empire, Diocletian, ordered a persecution of Christians, matched to some degree by a persecution in the western part of the empire by his colleague, the emperor Maximian.
2. Several imperial edicts were issued that called for the burning of Christian books, the demolition of Christian churches, the removal of class privileges for Christians, and eventually, the imprisonment of high-ranking Christian clergy.
3. In 304, a further edict required all Roman subjects to perform sacrifices to the gods; noncompliance meant death or forced labor.
4. This "Great Persecution," as it is called, lasted on and off for nearly a decade, well beyond the retirement of Diocletian and Maximian in 305 C.E.
5. But the persecution failed to force the majority of Christians to recant.
6. For a variety of reasons, official toleration for Christians was pronounced in both the western and eastern parts of the

empire by 313. People throughout the empire were granted freedom of religious choice and the property of the Christians was restored.

C. The senior emperor at that time was Constantine.

1. In 312, Constantine had begun to attribute his military and political ascendancy to the God of the Christians and to identify himself, as a result, as a Christian.
2. Once his base of power was secure, Constantine became quite active in church affairs, dealing with various controversies in an attempt to keep the church united. Some historians think that Constantine saw the Christian church, with its belief in *one* God, as a way to bring unity to the empire itself.
3. In 325 C.E., Constantine called the Council of Nicea—the first so-called "ecumenical council" of the church, that is, the first council at which bishops from around the world were brought together to establish a consensus on major points of faith and practice.
4. All these bishops agreed with the major theological positions hammered out by their proto-orthodox forebears. The council devised a creed that became the heart of what we today call the Nicene Creed.

D. As a result of the favors Constantine poured out on the church, conversion to the Christian faith soon became popular.

1. By the end of the century, it appears to have been the religion of choice of fully half the empire.
2. After Constantine, every emperor except one was Christian.
3. Near the end of the fourth century, Theodosius I (emperor, 379–395 C.E.) made Christianity (specifically Roman Christianity, with the bishop of Rome having ultimate religious authority) the official religion of the state, opposed the surviving pagan religions, and eventually banned pagan sacrificial practices.
4. More conversions naturally followed, until Christianity became *the* religion to be handed down to the Middle Ages and onward.

E. None of this would have happened without Constantine's "conversion."

1. In some ways, then, this conversion made Christianity the most powerful religious, historical, cultural, social, economic, and political force in the history of Western civilization, destined to change billions of lives.
2. And it continues to change and affect lives in our own day, not just in the West but in places as far flung as Eastern Europe, Korea, South America, and developing countries, in fact, throughout the world.
3. This is a far cry from its small and insignificant beginnings in the teachings of a lower-class Jewish peasant in a remote corner of the Roman world. Maybe this religion is best seen as a mustard, the smallest of all seeds, but when placed in the ground, an enormous bush grows so that the birds of the air can make nests in its branches.

Essential Reading:

James Carroll, *The Sword of Constantine*.

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, chapter 13.

Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Supplementary Reading:

Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*.

Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*.

Questions to Consider:

1. In your judgment, if Constantine had not converted, is it possible that Christianity still would have taken over the empire?
2. What would be different about our lives if the majority of people in the West were not Christian (either by profession or heritage) but pagan?

Timeline

333–323 B.C.	Conquests of Alexander the Great.
63 B.C.	Conquest of Palestine by the Romans.
44 B.C.	Assassination of Julius Caesar.
40–4 B.C.	Herod, king of the Jews.
27 B.C.–A.D. 14	Octavian Caesar Augustus as emperor.
4 B.C.?	Jesus's birth.
A.D. 14–37	Emperor Tiberius.
A.D. 26–36	Pilate as Governor of Judea.
A.D. 30?	Jesus's death.
A.D. 33?	Conversion of Paul.
A.D. 37–41	Emperor Caligula.
A.D. 41–54	Emperor Claudius.
A.D. 54–68	Emperor Nero.
A.D. 50–60	Pauline Epistles.
A.D. 50?–110	Ignatius of Antioch.
A.D. 62–113	Pliny the Younger.
A.D. 65?	Gospel of Mark.
A.D. 66–70	Jewish Revolt and destruction of the Temple.
A.D. 69–79	Emperor Vaspasian.
A.D. 70–156	Polycarp of Smyrna.
A.D. 79–81	Emperor Titus.
A.D. 80–85?	Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Book of Acts.
A.D. 81–96	Emperor Domitian.

A.D. 90–95?.................................... Gospel of John.

A.D. 95?.. Book of Revelation.

A.D. 98–117 .... Emperor Trajan.

A.D. 100–160 .... Justin Martyr.

A.D. 100–160?................................ Marcion.

A.D. 110–130?................................ Gospels of Peter and Thomas.

A.D. 130–200 .... Irenaeus.

A.D. 135?.. Epistle of Barnabas.

A.D. 150–?...................................... Clement of Alexandria.

A.D. 160–225 .... Tertullian.

A.D. 170–?...................................... Hippolytus of Rome.

A.D. 185–251 .... Origen of Alexandria.

d. A.D. 190 .... Melito of Sardis.

d. A.D. 203 .... Perpetua.

A.D. 249–251 .... Emperor Decius.

A.D. 260–340 .... Eusebius.

A.D. 284–305 .... Emperor Diocletian.

A.D. 285–337 .... Constantine (emperor, 306–337).

A.D. 300–375 .... Athanasius.

A.D. 303–312 .... The “Great Persecution.”

A.D. 312?.. “Conversion” of Constantine.

A.D. 315–403 .... Epiphanius.

A.D. 325 .... Council of Nicea.

A.D. 346–395 .... Theodosius I (emperor, 379–395).

Glossary

3 Corinthians: Part of the apocryphal Acts of John, a letter allegedly by Paul to the Corinthians warning against *docetic* teachers and emphasizing that Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human being and that there could be a future resurrection of the body.

adoptionism: The view that Jesus was not divine but was a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted by God to be his Son at his baptism

Alexander the Great: The great military leader of Macedonia (356–323 B.C.) whose armies conquered much of the lands around the Mediterranean, including Egypt, Palestine, and Persia, and who was responsible for the spread of Greek culture (Hellenism) throughout the lands he conquered.

apocalypticism: A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, but that these will be destroyed at the end of time, when God intervenes in history to bring in his Kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

apologists: Group of second- and third-century Christian intellectuals who wrote treatises defending Christianity against charges leveled against it.

apology: Literally, "defense"; used as a technical term for a reasoned defense of the faith against its opponents.

apostle: From a Greek word meaning "one who is sent." In early Christianity, the term designated emissaries of the faith who were special representatives of Christ. See **disciple**.

Apostles' Creed: An orthodox creed that affirms the essential elements of the faith; based on a creed that was formulated in Rome, probably sometime in the third century.

autograph: The original manuscript of a document, from a Greek word that means "the writing itself."

canon: From a Greek word that literally means "ruler" or "straight edge." The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the New Testament canon is, thus, the collection of books that Christians have traditionally accepted as authoritative.

cult: A reference to any ritualistic practices meant to honor God or the gods.

Didymus Judas Thomas: The alleged author of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, whose exploits are narrated in the Acts of Thomas; in these traditions, he is said to be the twin brother of Jesus.

docetism: The view that Jesus was not a human being but only "appeared" to be; from a Greek word that means "to seem" or "to appear."

Ebionites: A group of second-century adoptionists who maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

Epistle of Barnabas: Letter (falsely) attributed to Paul's companion Barnabas, which attempts to show the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, arguing that the Old Testament is a Christian, rather than a Jewish, book.

Gentiles: Designation for non-Jews.

Gnosticism: A group of ancient religions, closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present, evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret *gnosis* (Greek for "knowledge") of who they were and of how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

Gospel of Peter: A Gospel mentioned by Eusebius as containing a docetic Christology, a fragment of which was discovered in a monk's tomb in 1886; the fragment contains an alternative account of Jesus's trial, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, notable for its anti-Jewish emphases and its legendary qualities (including a tale of Jesus actually emerging from his tomb on Easter morning).

Gospel of Thomas: The most famous document of the Nag Hammadi library; it contains 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them similar to the sayings of the New Testament, others of them quite different, in that they appear to presuppose a Gnostic understanding of the world.

Greco-Roman world: The lands around the Mediterranean from roughly the time of Alexander the Great (c. 300 B.C.) to the time of the Roman emperor Constantine (c. A.D. 300).

heresiologist: An opponent of heresy; one who engages in literary polemics against heretical groups.

heresy: Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant; from a Greek word that means “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”; see **orthodoxy**).

liturgy: From the Greek word for “service,” used to refer to any communal act of worship, including, for Christianity, the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist.

manuscript: Any handwritten copy of a literary text.

Marcionites: Followers of Marcion, the second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods, the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

Melito of Sardis: Bishop of a city in Asia Minor in the mid-second century; author of a Passover homily that accuses Jews of the death of Jesus.

Nag Hammadi: Village in Upper (South) Egypt, near the place where a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, was discovered in 1945.

Nicea, Council of : The first major council of bishops from around the Christian world, called by the emperor Constantine in 325 C.E. in the city of Nicea. The council was to resolve theological disputes in the church, especially in light of Arianism; at its conclusion, the council issued a creed that eventually developed into the Nicene Creed.

Nicene Creed: Creed that developed out of the Council of Nicea, which affirms that Jesus is “of the same substance” as the Father, while being a distinct being from him.

orthodoxy: Literally, “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. For its opposite, see **heresy**.

paganism: Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world; an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

patripassianism: View of the relationship of God and Christ, widespread in the second century, in which Christ was God the Father himself, become flesh. The designation was invented by Tertullian as a term of derogation, meaning “those who make the Father suffer.” Also known as Sabellianism, after a prominent advocate of the view.

patristic writings: Writings of the orthodox church fathers (Latin: *patres*), starting with the period after the New Testament.

Proto-orthodox Christianity: A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the second and third centuries (including the Apostolic Fathers), which promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” by the victorious Christian party in the fourth and later centuries, in opposition to such groups as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics.

pseudepigrapha: Literally, “false writings”; commonly used of ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written pseudonymously.

pseudonymity: The practice of writing under a “false name,” evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

Roman Empire: All the lands (including Palestine) that had been conquered by Rome and were ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C. Before Augustus, Rome was a republic, ruled by the Senate.

sabellianism: See **patripassianism**.

Secret Book of John: Also known as the Apocryphon of John, one of the Gnostic books discovered among the Nag Hammadi library, in which John, the son of Zebeddee, is shown the secrets of how the divine realm, the material world, and humans came into being.

trinity: Key doctrine of orthodox Christianity, which maintained that the godhead consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are all equally God, even though there is only one God.

Biographical Notes

Athanasius: Athanasius was a highly influential and controversial bishop of Alexandria throughout the middle half of the fourth century. Born around 300 A.D., he was active in the large and powerful Alexandrian church already as a young man, appointed as deacon to the then bishop Alexander. He served as secretary at the important Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., which attempted to resolve critical issues concerning the nature of Christ as fully divine, of the same substance as God the Father, and co-eternal with the Father.

As bishop of Alexandria from 328 to 375, Athanasius was a staunch defender of the Nicene understanding of Christ and a key player in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, in which there were three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) who were nonetheless one God, all of the same substance. This defense created enormous difficulties for Athanasius in the face of powerful opposition, to which he reacted with a show of force (even violence). He was sent into exile on several occasions during his bishopric, spending nearly 16 years away from Alexandria while trying to serve as its bishop.

Author of numerous surviving works, Athanasius is also significant for his role in determining which books should be accepted in his churches as sacred scripture. In 367 A.D., in his 39th annual "Festal Letter," which like all the others, set the date for the celebration of Easter and included pastoral instruction, he indicated that the 27 books that we now have in the New Testament, and only those 27, should be regarded as canonical. This decree helped define the shape of the canon for all time and helped lead to the declaration of other books, such as the Gnostic Gospels and the like, as heretical.

Athenagoras: Not much is known about the second-century Christian apologist Athenagoras, because he is scarcely mentioned in the writings of other church fathers. The few references to him that survive indicate that he was a Greek philosopher who lived in Athens. His best known work is his "Apology ['Defense'] of Christianity," addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, probably written in 177 C.E. In it, Athenagoras defends Christians against charges of atheism and crass immorality involving incestuous orgies and ritual cannibalism and tries to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith to all others. Among his notable

contributions to Christian theology is his indication that Christians worship three, who are: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Eventually, such reflections led to the formation of the classical doctrine of the Trinity.

Barnabas: We are not well informed about the historical Barnabas. He is mentioned both by the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:13; 1 Cor. 9:6) and the Book of Acts (Acts 9:27; 11:22–26) as one of Paul's traveling companions. It appears that he was originally a Hellenistic Jew who converted to faith in Christ, then became, like Paul, a traveling missionary who spread the faith. The Book of Acts goes so far as to consider him one of the apostles (Acts 14:4, 14).

The Epistle of Barnabas discussed in this course is attributed to him, but modern scholars are reasonably sure that he could not have written it. The book appears to have been written some time around 130 or 135 A.D., some 60 years or so after the historical Barnabas would have died. The book was attributed to him, then, by Christians who wanted to advance its authoritative claims as being rooted in the views of one of the most important figures from the early years of Christianity.

Walter Bauer: Walter Bauer was an influential German theological scholar, whose scholarly work made a permanent impact on the field of early Christian studies. Born in 1877, he had university positions at Marburg, Breslau, and finally, Göttingen, where he spent the majority of his long career. He died in 1960.

Bauer is probably most well known for a Greek *lexicon* ("dictionary") of the New Testament and other early Christian writings that he edited and, after further revision, is still the standard work in the field and is called by his name. For this course, he is most important for his classic book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, in which he set out to dismantle the classical, Eusebian understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy. Looking at an enormous range of ancient sources and subjecting them to careful and minute analysis, sometimes with inquisitorial zeal, Bauer maintained that orthodoxy was *not* always the oldest and largest form of Christianity. Instead, what later came to be called heresy was, in many regions of Christendom, the oldest form of the faith and that, in many places, it was difficult to draw hard lines between what was heretical and what was orthodox. In his view, what later came to be crystallized into orthodoxy was the form of Christianity prominent in the early years in Rome; because of its administrative skill and material wealth,

the Roman church was able to cast its influence onto other churches of the Mediterranean, until eventually, its understanding of the faith became universal. Once this version of Christianity became dominant, its representatives (such as Eusebius) rewrote the history of the disputes, contending that their perspective had been dominant from the beginning.

Clement of Alexandria: Clement is a shadowy figure from the early days of the Alexandrian church. Born probably around 150 A.D., possibly in Athens, he appears to have come to Alexandria, Egypt, to pursue his theological training with leading Christian thinkers of his day. Tradition indicates that while there, he became the head of the catechetical school (which provided rudimentary training in the faith for Christian converts), but he fled Alexandria in 202 A.D. during a persecution there.

Clement is the author of several surviving works, including an important apology for Christianity, a book on Christian living and manners, and a book called the *Miscellanies*, which sketches out some of his most important philosophical and theological views.

Constantine the Great: Constantine was the first emperor, some three centuries after the birth of Jesus, to accept Christianity, to bring to an end its persecution, and to begin to bestow favors on the church that ultimately led to its triumph over the pagan religions of Rome. Born in 285 A.D., Constantine was, by the early fourth century, one of Rome's principal generals and became involved in a complicated set of power struggles over the ultimate rulership of Rome. According to his own account, delivered to Eusebius, the father of church history and Constantine's biographer, when Constantine marched against his rival Maxentius in Rome in 312, he had a vision of the cross and the words "in this, conquer." He took this as a divine sign and, having successfully overcome his opponent in battle, began openly to favor the Christian religion.

His real commitment to Christianity is open to question, because he continued to evidence devotion to pagan deities, as well. But he certainly brought an end to persecutions and, once he had consolidated his power, bestowed numerous benefits on the church that made it clearly advantageous for others among the empire's upper classes to convert. From being a small minority of possibly five to eight percent of the empire's population at the beginning of the fourth century (demographic numbers are nearly impossible to reach with any certainty), by the end of the century, Christians made up nearly half the populace and the faith became the

"official" religion of the state—in large part as a result of Constantine's conversion. Constantine died in 337, after receiving baptism on his deathbed.

Epiphanius: Epiphanius was the bishop of Salamis (on Cyprus) in the second half of the fourth century (315–403 A.D.). Known as a rigorous supporter of monasticism, he is most famous for his virulent attack on anything that struck him as heretical. His best preserved work is called the *Panarion*, which means "medicine chest." In it, he intends to provide the orthodox antidote for the bites of the serpents of heresy.

The book contains detailed accounts (some of them fabricated) and refutations of 80 different heresies that Epiphanius had come across during his ardent search for falsehood in the church (20 of the heresies are actually pre-Christian sets of false teaching). For some of the lesser known Gnostic groups, Epiphanius is our principle source of information; unfortunately, given his lack of intellectual restraint, many of his claims appear to be unreliable.

Eusebius: Eusebius of Caesarea is one of the most important figures in the history of the early church. Born around 260 A.D., he was trained by some of the leading Christian scholars of his time and was to become the first author to produce a full history of Christianity up to his own day, in a book called the *Ecclesiastical (or Church) History*. Eusebius was quite active in the politics of the church and empire; ordained bishop of the large and important church of Caesarea in 315, he was active at the Council of Nicea and the theological disputes in its aftermath, originally opposing but later accepting the creedal statements about Christ that were to become orthodox. He died around 340 A.D.

Eusebius was a prolific writer, but it was his *Ecclesiastical History* in particular that made a huge impact on subsequent generations—down to our own day. This chronological sketch of early Christianity provides us with the majority of our information about the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, the persecution of the early Christians, the conflicts between what Eusebius considered to be orthodoxy and heresies, the development of church offices and structures, and so on. Of particular value in this 10-volume work is Eusebius's frequent citation, often lengthy, of his actual sources; through his account, then, we have access to the writings of his Christian predecessors that otherwise have been lost to history. Thus, even though Eusebius puts his own slant on the history that he tells, it is

possible to use the sources that he cites to gain significant insight into the conflicts and developments that transpired in the Christian church of the first three centuries up to his own day.

Hippolytus: Hippolytus was a controversial figure in the Roman church in the early third century, best known today for his 10-volume work against heresies (the second and third volumes of which are lost). Born around 170 A.D., Hippolytus became a prominent figure in the church in Rome, often taking strong stands against movements within the church that he considered heretical. In fact, he is the first known *anti-pope*, that is, one who allowed himself to be elected as the true pope on the grounds that the reigning pope (in this case, a man named Callistus; pope from 217–222) was a heretic (holding a Sabellianist Christology that equated Jesus and God the Father) and had no right to claim the papal office. Probably because of his schismatic activities (and partly because he wrote in Greek, rather than Latin), Hippolytus was largely forgotten in the Western church until modern times, when some of his writings were discovered.

The most important writings are (a) the *Refutation of All Heresies*, which explains the various heresies of the Christian church and tries to show how each of them is rooted, not in the Christian revelation, but in secular (and, therefore, erroneous) philosophical traditions, and (b) the *Apostolic Traditions*, which describes and prescribes the ecclesiastical structure and liturgical practices of the church in Rome at the beginning of the third century.

Ignatius: Ignatius is one of the most interesting figures from the early second century. We know little of his life, except that he was bishop of the major church in Antioch, Syria; was arrested for Christian activities; and was sent to Rome under armed guard to face execution by being thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman arena. En route to his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote seven surviving letters to churches that had sent representatives to greet him. In these letters, he warns against false teachers, urges the churches to strive for unity, stresses the need for the churches to adhere to the teachings and policies of the one bishop residing over each of them, and emphasizes that he is eager to face his violent death so that he might be a true disciple of Christ.

One of the letters that he wrote was to the bishop of the city of Smyrna, Polycarp, who may have been the one who collected the other letters together. Within a couple of centuries, Christian authors forged other letters

allegedly by Ignatius; throughout the Middle Ages, these forgeries were circulated with the authentic letters and were not recognized for what they were until scholars undertook an assiduous examination of them in the 17th century.

Irenaeus: Irenaeus was an important theologian and heresiologist of the late second century. Born probably around 130 A.D., he may have been raised in the city of Smyrna and educated, eventually, at Rome. He ended up in the Christian church of Lyon, Gaul (modern-day France), where he was made bishop around 178 A.D. He died around the year 200 A.D.

Irenaeus is our best patristic source for the Gnostic sects of the second century. His well-known book is a five-volume attack on heresy, which he entitled *Refutation and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Gnosis*, frequently called simply *Against Heresies*. In it, he gives considerable detail concerning various heretical groups (not simply Gnostics) and, based on his understanding of Scripture and using a full panoply of rhetorical ploys and stratagems, refutes them one by one. This book was used as a source for many of the later heresiologists, including Tertullian and Epiphanius.

Jesus: We do not know when Jesus was born, but if it was during the reign of King Herod of Israel, as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, then it must have been sometime before 4 B.C., the date of Herod's death. Jesus was raised in a Jewish home in the small village of Nazareth in Galilee, the northern part of what is now Israel. As an adult, he engaged in an itinerant preaching ministry in largely rural areas of Galilee; there is no record of him visiting any large cities until his fateful journey to Jerusalem at the end of his life. His message was comparable to that found in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible: The people of Israel must repent or they will be faced with judgment. Jesus, however, gave this message an apocalyptic twist, as did many other religious Jews of his day. The coming judgment would be of cosmic proportions and brought by an emissary from heaven, the Son of Man, who would overthrow the forces of evil and establish God's Kingdom on Earth. When this happened, there would be a serious reversal of fortunes: Those in power now would be destroyed, and those who suffered and were oppressed would be exalted. People needed to prepare for this historical cataclysm by turning back to God and keeping his Law, especially as interpreted by Jesus himself.

Despite Jesus's reputation as a healer and exorcist, he was not viewed favorably by Jewish leaders. At the end of his life, he came to Jerusalem

during a Passover feast, caused a disturbance in the Temple, and raised the ire and fears of the ruling party, the Sadducees, who were intent on keeping the peace and avoiding any riots during such tumultuous times. They had Jesus arrested and turned him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who ordered him crucified as a troublemaker. Scholars dispute the precise year of his death, but it must have been some time around 30 A.D.

Justin Martyr: Justin was an important figure in the mid-second–century church of Rome. Born of pagan parents (c. 100 A.D.), evidently in Samaria, he undertook secular philosophical training before converting to Christianity when he was about 30. He began to teach the philosophical superiority of Christianity to secular learning, first in Ephesus, then in Rome, where he established a kind of Christian philosophical school in mid-century.

Justin is the first prominent Christian *apologist*, that is, one who defended the Christian faith against the charges of its cultured (pagan) despisers and strove to show its intellectual and moral superiority to anything that the pagan (or Jewish) world could offer. Three of his major works survive, usually known as his *First Apology* (a defense of Christianity addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons, including Marcus Aurelius, around 155 A.D.), his *Second Apology* (addressed to the Roman Senate around 160 A.D.), and his *Dialogue with Trypho*, an account of his conversion and subsequent debate with a (possibly fictitious) Jewish rabbi, Trypho, over the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, based largely on an exposition of key passages in the Old Testament.

Justin's defense of Christianity led to political opposition; he was martyred on charges of being a Christian around 165 C.E.

Marcion: Marcion was one of the most infamous "heretics" of the second century. Tradition indicates that he was born and raised in Sinope, on the southern shore of the Black Sea, where as a young man, he acquired considerable wealth as a shipping merchant. His father was allegedly the bishop of the Christian church there, who excommunicated his son for his false teachings. In 139 A.D., Marcion went to Rome, where he spent five years developing his theological views, before presenting them to a specially called council of the church leaders. Rather than accepting Marcion's understanding of the gospel, however, the church expelled him for false teaching. Marcion then journeyed into Asia Minor, where he proved remarkably successful in converting others to his understanding of

the Christian message. *Marcionite* churches were in existence for centuries after his death, which took place around 160 A.D.

Marcion's understanding of the gospel was rooted in his interpretation of the writings of the apostle Paul, whose differentiation between the "Law" (of the Old Testament) and the "Gospel" (of Christ) Marcion took to an extreme, claiming that the old and new were fundamentally different, so much so that they represented the religions of different Gods. Marcion, in other words, was a *ditheist*, who thought that the Old Testament God—who had created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his Law—was a different god from the God of Jesus, who came into the world in the "appearance" of human flesh (because he was not actually part of the material world of the creator-God) to save people from the just but wrathful God of the Jews. Marcion's views were based on his canon of Scripture—the first canon known to be formally advanced by a Christian—which did not, obviously, contain anything from the Old Testament, but comprised a form of the Gospel of Luke and 10 of Paul's letters (all those currently in the New Testament except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

Melito of Sardis: Little is known of the life of Melito, apart from the facts that he was bishop of the city of Sardis near the end of the second century (died around 190 A.D.); that, at some point in his life, he made a pilgrimage to the Christian sites of the holy land; and that he was a staunch advocate of proto-orthodox Christianity. The one literary work of his to survive, discovered in the 20th century, is a homily apparently delivered at an Easter celebration, in which Melito explicates the Old Testament account of the Passover in a way that shows that the Passover Lamb represents Christ. In Melito's view, because Christ has fulfilled the foreshadowings and predictions of the Jewish Scriptures, the laws of the Jews are no longer in force. The old has passed away with the appearance of the new.

In the course of this highly rhetorical exposition, Melito takes the occasion to lambaste the people of Israel for rejecting their own Messiah, and his language at times is vitriolic in its anti-Judaic claims. This sermon represents the first known instance of a Christian charging the Jewish people with *deicide*, "the murder of god."

Origen: Origen was the most brilliant and prolific Christian author of the first three centuries. A lengthy account of his life is provided by Eusebius, in Book 6 of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Born in 185 A.D. in Alexandria, Egypt, of Christian parents, Origen was trained by some of the leading

scholars of his day. Tradition claims that after a severe persecution in Alexandria in 202 A.D., in which his father was martyred, the highly precocious Origen was appointed to be head of the catechetical school, which trained Christian converts in the rudiments of the faith. But he periodically came into conflict with the bishop of the Alexandrian church, named Demetrius, and eventually (in 230 A.D.), left Alexandria to settle in Caesarea, where he devoted himself to teaching, research, and writing. He was imprisoned during the persecution of the Roman emperor Decius in 250 A.D. and died two years later as a result of prolonged torture.

Origen's literary output was immense, aided by a literary patron, Ambrose, who provided him with extensive secretarial help (stenographers, copyists, and so on). He is thought to have produced nearly 2,000 volumes, including biblical commentaries, volumes of homilies, theological treatises, polemical tractates (against heresies), apologies, and practical and pastoral works. Most of his works are lost, but those that survive still fill many volumes. As a theologian, Origen developed many ideas that later became highly debated in disputes over the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the nature of the soul; as a biblical scholar, he developed and refined methods of interpretation—including the extensive use of figurative modes of exegesis—that proved highly influential in interpretive methods used down through the Middle Ages.

Paul: Paul was a Hellenistic Jew born and raised outside of Palestine. We do not know when he was born, but it was probably sometime during the first decade A.D. Through his own letters and the encomiastic account found in the Book of Acts, we can learn something of his history. He was raised as a strict Pharisaic Jew and prided himself on his scrupulous religiosity. At some point in his early adulthood, he learned of the Christians and their proclamation of the crucified man Jesus as the Messiah; incensed by this claim, Paul began a rigorous campaign of persecution against the Christians, only to be converted himself to faith in Jesus through some kind of visionary experience.

Paul then became an ardent proponent of the faith and its best known missionary. He saw his call as a missionary to the Gentiles and worked in major urban areas in the regions of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia to establish churches through the conversion of former pagans. A distinctive aspect of his message was that all people, Jew and Gentile, are made right with God through Jesus's death and Resurrection and by no other means; the practical payoff was that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish in

order to be among the people of the Jewish God—in particular, the men did not need to become circumcised.

We know about Paul principally through the letters that he wrote to his churches when problems arose that he wanted to address. There are seven letters in the New Testament that indisputably come from his hand; six others claim him as an author, but there are reasons to doubt these claims. According to the Book of Acts, Paul was eventually arrested for socially disruptive behavior and sent to Rome to face trial. An early tradition outside of the New Testament indicates that Paul was martyred there, in Rome, during the reign of the emperor Nero, in A.D. 64.

Perpetua: Perpetua was a martyr during the persecutions in Carthage, North Africa, in 203 C.E. She was a young Roman matron, mother of an infant, and daughter of a pagan father who attempted to have her recant of her Christian faith at her trial. His efforts were spurned by his daughter, who insisted on paying the ultimate price for her faith.

We know about Perpetua's sufferings and imprisonment, because she kept a diary after her arrest. Among the many fascinating features of the record are her accounts of four dreams, two of which concerned a younger (non-Christian) brother who had died of cancer and was in the place of punishment before her prayers brought his release, and two others that anticipate her own death in the arena.

The narrative of her martyrdom itself was added in another hand; it describes in graphic detail the events surrounding the hunting games in the arena in which she and her Christian companions, including her slave Felicitas, were killed by wild beasts.

Polycarp: Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, in Asia Minor, for most of the first half of the second century. Born around 70 C.E., he was martyred as a Christian in 156 C.E.; the account of his arrest, trial, and execution (by being burned at the stake) are preserved for us in a firsthand report written in a letter by fellow Christians in Smyrna. This is the first detailed account of a martyrdom outside the New Testament to survive from ancient Christianity.

Some 45 years before his death, Polycarp had received a letter from Ignatius of Antioch, which still survives; Ignatius indicates that he had stayed in Smyrna en route to his own martyrdom in Rome and had come to know and respect the bishop there. In addition, we have a letter (or more

likely, two letters, later spliced together) written by Polycarp himself to the Christians of Philippi, addressing ethical and theological issues that had arisen in their church.

Although not an original thinker, Polycarp was one of the most well known and important proto-orthodox leaders of the early and mid-second century. Later legend indicates that he had once been a companion of the apostle John and later became the teacher of Irenaeus; the latter claim may be accurate, but there appears to be little credible evidence for the former.

Tertullian: Tertullian, from Carthage (North Africa), was one of the most influential authors of early Christianity. Much of his life is shrouded in obscurity, but it appears that he was born into a relatively affluent family of pagans around 160 A.D. and received extensive training in (pagan) literature and rhetoric. He converted to Christianity some time in his mid-30s, then became an outspoken, even vitriolic, proponent of the Christian faith, writing numerous works defending the faith against its cultured despisers (*apologies*), scathing criticisms of heretics and their beliefs, and severe tractates concerning Christian morality. At some point in his life, he joined a group of schismatics known to history as the Montanists (named after their founder, Montanus), an ethically rigorous, ascetic group that anticipated the imminent end of the world as we know it.

A bitter opponent of both Gnostics and Marcionites, Tertullian is one of our best sources of information concerning what these groups, especially the latter, believed. His five-volume attack on Marcion, for example, still survives and is our principal means of access to Marcion's life and teaching.

Theodosius I: Theodosius "the Great" was Roman emperor during the turbulent years of 379–395. Although active as a military leader, he is most important for this course for the role he played in the Christian church. In 380, he published an edict declaring that the "true" understanding of the faith was to be that promulgated by the bishop of Rome; the following year, he called a church council (the Council of Constantinople) that condemned competing understandings of the faith (*Arianism*, which disputed the understanding of the Creed of Nicea that Christ was "of the same substance" as the Father). Theodosius eventually published legislation that made pagan cultic practices illegal. In effect, then, it was under the reign of Theodosius and as a result of the assertion of his authority that Christianity became the "official" state religion of Rome.

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———. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader*. New York: Oxford, 1998. A collection of all of the writings by the early Christians from within the first century after Jesus's death (that is, written before 130 A.D.), both canonical and non-canonical. It includes several of the texts discussed in this course. Ideal for beginning students.

———. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A study of the ways scribes were influenced by doctrinal disputes in the early church and of how they modified their texts of the New Testament to make them conform more closely with their own theological views. Best suited for more advanced students.

Elliott, J. K. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993. An excellent one-volume collection of non-canonical Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, in a readable English translation with brief introductions.

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———. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. 2nd ed. New York: Garland, 1998. A useful reference tool with brief articles on every aspect of early Christianity and up-to-date bibliographies. Suitable for beginning students and scholars alike.

Fredriksen, Paula. *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. An important and widely used study of the earliest Christian views of Jesus and of the ways they developed as Christianity moved away from its Jewish roots.

———. *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish life and the Emergence of Christianity*. New York: Knopf, 1999. A lively sketch of the life and teachings of Jesus that takes seriously the Jewish world in which he lived and pays close attention to the problems posed by our surviving sources.

Frend, W. H. C. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1965. This classic is the best full-length study of Christian persecution and martyrdom during the first three centuries A.D., which tries to understand Christian views of martyrdom in light of the martyrdoms in the Jewish tradition.

———. *The Rise of Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984. A full introductory discussion of the major issues involved with the history of the first six centuries of Christianity, packed with important information, names, and dates.

Gager, John. *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*. New York: Oxford, 1983. A seminal study of anti-Jewish attitudes and activities in the Roman world, especially in early Christianity.

Gamble, Harry. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A clearly written and informative overview of the formation of the canon that shows how, why, and when Christians chose the current 27 books to include in their sacred Scriptures of the New Testament.

Grant, Robert M. *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988. A survey of all the Christian apologists writing in Greek during the second century, focusing on their major themes and the sources of their ideas. For more advanced students.

———. *Jesus after the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990. An intriguing discussion of different understandings of Christology among a variety of early Christian groups in the decades after the New Testament was written.

———. *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*. Tr. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma. Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990. The classic study of the life and teachings of the second-century philosopher-theologian Marcion.

Hengel, Martin. *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the History of Earliest Christianity*. London, SCM Press, 1983. A collection of essays on important aspects of the development of Christian thought during its earliest years, before the writing of the books of the New Testament.

Hennecke, Edgar, and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds. *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. Trans. by A. J. B. Higgins, et. al. Ed. by R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1991. English translations of all the early non-canonical writings preserved from Christian antiquity, with

detailed scholarly introductions; an indispensable resource for advanced students.

Klijn, A. F. J. *Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992. An authoritative discussion of the Jewish-Christian Gospels of the Ebionites, Nazareans, and Hebrews, including English translations of the remains of these texts.

Macmullen, Ramsey. *Christianizing the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. A succinct and learned account of how Christianity managed to convert pagans to faith in Jesus in the first several centuries of the church, emphasizing the role of "miracles" in the Christian mission.

Meeks, Wayne, ed. *The Writings of St. Paul*. New York: Norton, 1972. An annotation of the Pauline editions that includes a number of classical essays on key problems and issues in the study of Paul's writings (including ones by F. Nietzche and George Bernard Shaw).

———. *The First Urban Christian: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. An impressive and influential study of Paul, not from the perspective of the theology of his writings, but in light of what can be known of the social world in which he lived, worked, and wrote.

Meier, John. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1. New York: Doubleday, 1991. An authoritative discussion of the historical Jesus (three volumes are available to this point) by a highly knowledgeable and sensible scholar.

Metzger, Bruce. *The Canon of the New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987. The most thorough and informative account of the formation of the New Testament canon, by one of the world's eminent scholars of early Christianity.

Musurillo, H., ed. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972. An intriguing collection of 28 accounts of Christian martyrdoms in English translation, taken from eyewitness sources of the second to fourth centuries.

Norris, Richard. *The Christological Controversy*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. A useful presentation of some of the major texts from antiquity involving the controversies over the nature and person of Christ.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative account of the views of some of the early Gnostics in relation to emerging Christian orthodoxy.

Pelikan, Jeroslav. *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1. Chicago: University Press, 1971. An authoritative discussion of the theology and theologians of early Christianity in the first centuries of the church.

Perkins, Judith. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995. An intriguing investigation of early Christian understandings of pain, suffering, and persecution in light of a broader cultural shift in the understanding of the self in the early centuries of Christianity; one's bodily suffering became a celebrated mark of self-identity.

Robinson, James, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. A convenient English translation of the documents discovered at Nag Hammadi, with brief introductions.

Roetzel, Calvin. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 3rd ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1991. One of the best available introductory discussions of the Pauline Epistles, which includes an examination of the issues of authorship and date, as well as a sketch of the major themes of each letter.

———. *The World That Shaped the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002. A nice overview of the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds from which Christianity emerged, by a scholar of the New Testament; good for beginning students.

Rudolph, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Tr. R. McL. Wilson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987. Still the best book-length introduction to ancient Gnosticism.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Seabury, 1974. A controversial discussion by a prominent feminist theologian of the early Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, which maintains that anti-Semitism is the necessary corollary of Christian belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Rusch, William G. *The Trinitarian Controversy*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. A presentation of key texts in the ancient controversies involved with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin, 1993. One of the best introductions available to the life and teachings of the historical Jesus. It is well-suited for beginning students.

———. *Judaism Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E.–66 C.E.* London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1992. A full,

detailed, and authoritative account of what it meant to be a Jew immediately before and during the time of the New Testament, by one of the great New Testament scholars of our generation.

Sandmel, Samuel. *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978. A clear and interesting discussion, from the perspective of a prominent Jewish scholar of the New Testament, of whether parts of the New Testament should be viewed as anti-Semitic.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1968. The classic study of the major attempts to write a biography of Jesus up to the first part of the 20th century (the German original appeared in 1906). It is also one of the first and perhaps the most important attempt to portray Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist.

Segal, Alan. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. An intriguing assessment of the teachings and theology of Paul in light of the Judaism of his day, focusing on the role and significance of his "conversion" to become a follower of Jesus; written by an important scholar of ancient Judaism.

Setzer, Claudia. *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30–150 C.E.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994. A nice overview of how Jews reacted to Christians during the first 120 years of Jewish-Christian relations. Good for beginning students.

Shelton, Jo-Ann, ed. *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. A highly useful anthology of ancient texts that deal with every major aspect of life in the Roman world, including religion.

Siker, Jeffrey. *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991. An important study of how such Christian authors as Paul and Justin used the figure Abraham, father of the Jews, in their attacks on Jewish understandings of Scripture and salvation.

Simon, Marcel. *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*. Tr. H. McKeating. New York: Oxford, 1986. A standard study of Jewish-Christian relations in the early centuries of the church.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. A widely read account of the

spread of early Christianity throughout the Roman Empire that considers, in particular, sociological explanations for its success. For popular audiences.

Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. A discussion of the leadership roles played by women in the earliest stages of Christianity and an account of how women's voices eventually came to be silenced over time. Good for popular audiences.

Turcan, Robert. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. This is a superb introduction to some of the major religious cults in the Roman Empire from roughly the time of early Christianity (and before).

Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. A readable but very learned study of Jesus in light of traditions of other Jewish "holy men" from his time, written by a prominent New Testament scholar at Oxford.

von Campenhausen, H. *The Formation of the Christian Bible*. Tr. J. A. Baker. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972. An important and erudite study of the formation of the New Testament canon, for more advanced students.

———. *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969. A classical study by an important German scholar of the formation of church structure over the formative periods of Christianity. For advanced students.

von Harnack, Adolf. *History of Dogma*, vol. 1. Tr. from the 3rd ed. by Neil Buchanan. New York: Dover, 1961 (German original, 1900). A classic and invaluable sketch of the development of Christian theology during the early centuries of the church, by one of the most erudite historians of Christianity of modern times.

Wilken, Robert. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. A popular and clearly written account of the mainly negative views of Christians held by several Roman authors. It is particularly suitable for beginning students.

Williamson, G. A. *Eusebius: The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Rev. and ed. Andrew Louth. London: Penguin, 1989. A handy and accessible English translation of Eusebius's classic work, the *Church History*.

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